

# Genesis 15 in Light of the Restoration

David Rolph Seely

*For Truman G. Madsen, with admiration for his learning and love of the restoration and the ability to articulate it well, with acknowledgment for all that he has taught me through the spoken and the written word, and most of all, with appreciation for his friendship throughout the years.*

The biblical narrative in Genesis 11:10–25:18 dramatically presents the events of Abraham’s life and the covenant the Lord made with him. The covenant of Abraham provides the foundation for the whole story of the Bible, and the stories in the Genesis narratives serve two purposes: first, to teach the children of Abraham the promises of the covenant, and second, to show them how they can attain the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant by following the model of righteousness that their ancestors Abraham and Sarah displayed. Isaiah, speaking centuries after Abraham, explains: “Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged. Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you” (Isaiah 51:1–2).

The narrative of Abraham has a certain rhythm. The covenant is first mentioned at the beginning of the story in conjunction with the Lord’s command for Abraham to leave his native land and go to a new land. The Lord says, “And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:2–3). Inherent in this blessing, as clarified by the account in the Book of Abraham, are the promises of posterity, land, and priesthood (Abraham 2:9–11).

Throughout Abraham’s life the Lord tested and tried him, and Abraham had to prove himself and solve numerous crises. Jewish tradition describes the Abrahamic narrative as the ten tests or trials of Abraham.<sup>1</sup> As Abraham passed each test, the Lord repeated and further clarified the covenant. Thus, the first test in the biblical narrative is the commandment for Abraham to leave the land of his birth to go to a new land.<sup>2</sup> In conjunction with Abraham’s obedience, the Lord gives the covenant in Genesis 12:1–3. The next crisis involves the division of the land between Abraham and Lot (Genesis 13:5–13); the covenant is reaffirmed with emphasis on the promise of land (Genesis 13:14–17). Later, the Lord reaffirms the covenant in conjunction with the commandment of circumcision (Genesis 17:4–8), and finally, after the last and supreme test of the sacrifice of Abraham’s son Isaac, the Lord swears an oath, “By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son...” (Genesis 22:16). He then reiterates the promises of the Abrahamic covenant: “That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 22:17–18).

A pivotal chapter in this narrative is Genesis 15. In this chapter Abraham speaks to the Lord for the first time recorded in the Old Testament and asks the Lord how the divine promises of posterity and land are to come about. The Lord answers each of Abraham’s questions and gives him concrete visual images or signs to mark their fulfillment. In Jewish tradition this chapter is referred to as the Covenant between the Pieces (Hebrew *ha-bərit bein ha-bətarim*), referring to the strange and mysterious ritual in which Abraham slaughters five animals and lays the pieces end to end and the Lord passes between the pieces (Genesis 15:14–20 JST).

A substantial amount of critical scholarship, easily accessible through excellent commentaries, has been written about this chapter in Genesis, particularly regarding the mysterious ritual of the pieces.<sup>3</sup> And yet scholars have paid little attention to the wealth of knowledge about this chapter restored by modern revelation, in particular that contained in the Joseph Smith Translation (hereafter JST). In this short study, rather than attempting a comprehensive commentary on Genesis 15, I will simply review the chapter in its biblical context and in light of the restoration—noting those important things we can learn from the JST, the restoration scriptures (the Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price, and Doctrine and Covenants), and the teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the name Abraham throughout, except in the citations of the Genesis 15 text, which uses Abram.

### **Genesis 15 in Its Literary and Historical Context**

The context of chapter 15 is important. The preceding chapters portray Abraham as proving his worthiness in a variety of ways. In chapter 12, when he is asked to leave his native land, Abraham silently obeys. When the servants of Lot and Abraham quarrel (chapter 13), it is Abraham, as the peacemaker, who comes forward and allows Lot to have his choice of the land. Chapter 14 details the capture of Lot and his subsequent rescue by Abraham, as the warrior. On his way home, Abraham stops to meet with Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the most high God, to receive a blessing at his hand. Abraham recognizes Melchizedek's priesthood authority and pays his tithes to him (cf. Alma 13:15). On this occasion, according to the Prophet Joseph Smith, Melchizedek taught Abraham about the priesthood and the coming of the Savior. The Prophet taught, "Abraham says to Melchizedek, I believe all that thou hast taught me concerning the priesthood and the coming of the Son of Man; so Melchizedek ordained Abraham [D&C 84:14] and sent him away. Abraham rejoiced, saying, Now I have a priesthood."<sup>4</sup> Latter-day Saints are fortunate to have important JST additions to the biblical text in Genesis 14 (Genesis 14:25–40 JST), which restore much knowledge about Melchizedek and the blessing he pronounced upon Abraham.<sup>5</sup>

Genesis 15 begins with dramatic statements that the Lord will be a shield to Abraham, will be a great reward to him, and will fulfill the blessings of Melchizedek (Genesis 15:2 JST). In response, Abraham, who up to this point in the biblical narrative has silently and dutifully obeyed the commandments of the Lord, speaks to the Lord for the first time in the record. The conversation is poignant—Abraham has been promised posterity, and yet he has no seed; he has been promised land, and yet he has no land; and he has been promised an "everlasting inheritance," and yet he is getting older and closer to dying. Important JST additions to chapter 15 (Genesis 15:2, 9–12 JST) indicate that Abraham's conversation with the Lord can best be understood in light of the blessing pronounced upon Abraham in Genesis 14:36–40 JST:

And this Melchizedek, having thus established righteousness, was called the king of heaven by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace. And he lifted up his voice, and he blessed Abram, being the high priest, and the keeper of the storehouse of God; Him whom God had appointed to receive tithes for the poor. Wherefore, Abram paid unto him tithes of all that he had, of all the riches which he possessed, which God had given him more than that which he had need. And it came to pass, that God blessed Abram, and gave unto him riches, and honor, and lands for an everlasting possession; according to the covenant which he had made, and according to the blessing wherewith Melchizedek had blessed him.

### **The Structure of Genesis 15 JST**

Genesis 15 JST can be divided into five units: first, the Lord's declaration of blessings (vv.1–2), followed by three nearly parallel units dealing with Abraham's three questions about the promised blessings: the promises that Abraham will have seed (vv.3–8), that the land will be an everlasting inheritance (vv.9–12), and that Abraham's posterity will inherit the land (vv.13–20). Each of these three central units is tripartite, consisting of Abraham's question, the Lord's promise, and the Lord's giving to Abraham a dramatic visual sign by which he can understand and remember the promise. Verse 12 records Abraham's response to the Lord's promised blessings. The concluding unit (vv.21–22) is a summary of the chapter in which the Lord once again covenants with Abraham. The Masoretic text preserved in the KJV does not have verses 9–12

JST about the everlasting covenant and thus deals only with the questions about seed and the inheritance of the land by Abraham's posterity.

The following table displays the contents of Genesis 15 JST in a convenient format.

| The Structure of Genesis 15 JST   |   |  |   |   |
|---|---|--|---|---|
|   | Abraham's Question  | Lord's Promise   | Visual Sign   | Abraham's Response  |
| 1. The Lord comes to Abraham in a vision and promises him blessings (1–2)                 |   |  |   |   |
| 2. Blessing of seed (3–8)   | “Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless?” (3–4)                | Lord promises Abraham seed: “he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir” (5–6)   | Abraham's seed to be as the stars in the heavens (7–8)    |   |
| 3. Blessing of an everlasting inheritance (9–12)  | “Lord God, how wilt thou give me this land for an everlasting inheritance?” (9) | Lord promises Abraham land for an everlasting inheritance: “Though thou wast dead, yet am I not able to give it thee? And if thou shalt die, yet thou shalt possess it, for the day cometh, that the Son of Man shall live; but how can he live if he be not dead? he must first be quickened” (10–11) | Abraham sees a vision of the days of the Son of Man (12a) | Abraham “was glad, and his soul found rest, and he believed in the Lord; and the Lord counted it unto him for righteousness (12b) |
| 4. Blessing of the land (13–20)   | “Lord, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?” (14a)                     | Lord promises Abraham land: “I, the Lord, brought thee out of Ur, of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it” (13)  | Covenant between the Pieces (14b–20)                      |   |
| 5. The Lord makes a covenant with Abraham: “Unto thy seed have I given this land” (21–22) |   |  |   |   |

### Genesis 15 JST and Commentary<sup>6</sup>

#### 1. The Lord Comes to Abraham and Promises Him Blessings (1–2)

*1 And it came to pass, that after these things, the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying; 2 Fear not, Abram; I will be thy shield; I will be thy exceeding great reward. And according to the blessings of my servant, I will give unto thee.*

The phrase *after these things* alludes to the events of Genesis 14, the rescue of Lot and the meeting with Melchizedek. Most commentators note that the imagery of the shield (Hebrew *māgēn*) is a purposeful military metaphor based on the crisis of the rescue of Lot and an allusion to Genesis 14:20 in which Melchizedek says, “blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered (Hebrew *miggēn*) thine enemies into thy hand.” Likewise, the mention of the *exceeding great reward* may be a reference to Abraham’s refusal to take monetary compensation for his military action (Genesis 14:22–24). In this context, the phrase may be a reassurance to Abraham that he will nevertheless be blessed temporally.

The sentence *and according to the blessings of my servant, I will give unto thee* is not found in the KJV. This important addition clearly places the promises in Genesis 15 JST in the context of the blessings that Melchizedek pronounced and that were alluded to in Genesis 14 JST: “And Melchizedek lifted up his voice and blessed Abram. ... And it came to pass, that God blessed Abram, and gave unto him riches, and honor, and lands for an everlasting possession; according to the covenant which he had made, and according to the blessing wherewith Melchizedek had blessed him” (Genesis 14:25, 40 JST).

## 2. The Blessing of Seed (3–8)

Abraham’s first question:

*3 And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and Eliezer of Damascus was made the steward of my house? 4 And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed; and lo, one born in my house is mine heir.*

This is the first time that Abraham speaks to the Lord in the biblical text. In this passage Abraham approaches the Lord on a subject that must have been troubling him for some time. In light of the promise that he was to have seed, how was he to arrange his inheritance since he had no seed? Abraham has apparently already arranged for the inheritance of his household and made his steward Eliezer his heir.

The Lord promises Abraham seed: *5 And behold, the word of the Lord came unto him again, saying, 6 This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.*

The Lord promises Abraham literal seed. While Abraham 2:10 clearly indicates that anyone who receives the gospel will be counted as the seed of Abraham, it is equally clear that Abraham would have literal seed who would be blessed with the right of the priesthood (Abraham 2:11).

The promise of seed is a prominent part of the Abrahamic covenant. Indeed, the whole of the Abrahamic narrative is framed by genealogies: the genealogy at the beginning recounts the ten generations from Shem to Abraham (Genesis 11:10–32), and the genealogies at the end record Abraham’s posterity through Keturah (Genesis 25:1–4) and Hagar (Genesis 25:12–18). The narrative in Genesis 25:19 through chapter 50, and through the rest of the Old Testament, traces Abraham’s posterity through Isaac and Jacob. The seed of Abraham that will bless all nations is the Messiah, through Abraham’s descendant David (2 Samuel 7), as foreshadowed by the story of the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22). The coming of this descendant of Abraham and David—the Messiah—is the central focus of the New Testament (Matthew 1:1; Acts 3:25–26).

In Genesis 16, immediately following the promise of seed in chapter 15, Abraham and Sarah arrange another way to get literal seed from Abraham—through Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar. In response, the Lord reaffirms his promise that Abraham and Sarah would have literal seed (Genesis 18:10).

First visual sign: *7 And he brought him forth abroad, and he said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them. 8 And he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.*

Three metaphors from nature are used as visual signs for the number of Abraham's seed in Genesis: the dust of the earth (Genesis 13:16), the stars in the heaven (Genesis 15:5), and the sand on the seashore (Genesis 22:17; Abraham 3:14). The image of the heavens is of particular interest in that Abraham, according to Abraham 3 and Josephus, was an avid and accomplished astronomer.<sup>7</sup>

Certainly these images refer to the earthly posterity of Abraham. At the same time, the vast number of posterity and the cosmic magnitude of the heavens, earth, and sea surely also point toward the promise of eternal increase given to those who become celestial beings (D&C 131:4; 132:16–17). It is interesting that these same three images are reflected in titles of God in the Abrahamic narratives: “the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth” (Genesis 14:22); “I am the Lord thy God; I dwell in heaven; the earth is my footstool; I stretch my hand over the sea” (Abraham 2:7).

### **3. The Blessing of an Everlasting Inheritance (9–12)**

Abraham's second question:

*9 And Abram said, Lord God, how wilt thou give me this land for an everlasting inheritance?*

The phrase *everlasting inheritance* is certainly an allusion to the Lord's promise in Genesis 14:40 JST: “And it came to pass, that God blessed Abram, and gave unto him riches, and honor, and lands for an everlasting possession; according to the covenant which he had made, and according to the blessing wherewith Melchizedek had blessed him.”

The Lord's promise of an everlasting inheritance: *10 And the Lord said, Though thou wast dead, yet am I not able to give it thee? 11 And if thou shalt die, yet thou shalt possess it, for the day cometh, that the Son of Man shall live; but how can he live if he be not dead? he must first be quickened.*

By the way the Lord answers Abraham's question it is plain that Abraham wants to know how he can inherit the land in an “everlasting” way, even though it is certain that he is going to die. Further, while the land of Canaan is the most prominent symbol of the covenant throughout the Old Testament, it is clear that the seed of Abraham will be given other lands as well. For example, the prophecy in the blessing Jacob gave to Joseph says that Joseph will be a bough “whose branches run over the wall” (Genesis 49:22), a promise fulfilled to the descendants of Lehi in the Americas (1Nephi 2:20; Jacob 2:25; 3Nephi 15:12, 13; 20:14, 22; 21:22; Ether 13:2–8). The promise of land to Abraham and his posterity thus extends beyond the geographical boundaries of the land of Canaan. Modern revelation teaches us that the geographical boundaries of the promised land will expand to include the entire earth, for the whole earth will become the celestial kingdom (D&C 88:19–20).

The Lord explains to Abraham that *everlasting inheritance* means that an inheritance in the promised land is not confined to mortality but extends to eternity. Through modern revelation we learn that, as covenanted in Genesis 15 JST, the seed of Abraham will find an everlasting inheritance in the promised land, and Abraham and his righteous, celestial seed will inherit the earth forever (D&C 38:20; 45:58; 56:20).

The Book of Abraham also teaches that the promise to Abraham's seed of the land as an everlasting possession was conditional, based upon their righteousness. The Lord says, “I will give unto thy seed after thee for an

everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice” (Abraham 2:6). While the covenant of the land to the seed of Abraham was unconditional in the eternal sense—that the righteous would eventually inherit the celestial kingdom—in the temporal sense the agreement was conditional upon obedience to the obligations of the covenant.

Second visual sign: *12a And it came to pass, that Abram looked forth and saw the days of the Son of Man,*

While the details of the vision are not given, this visual sign of *the days of the Son of Man* is undoubtedly the most important vision in the chapter. Whereas Melchizedek had taught Abraham about the coming of the Son of Man,<sup>8</sup> Abraham now sees the vision for himself. His vision was probably similar to that seen by Enoch (Moses 7:47–59) and Nephi (1Nephi 10–11) and must have included the vision of the death and resurrection of the Savior (Helaman 8:17; John 8:56).

The title *Son of Man* is a very ancient one, used already by Adam and Enoch in the Book of Moses (Moses 6:57; 7:47). In the context of Genesis 15 JST, it is worth noting that the Son of Man would also be a son of Abraham—the patriarch’s descendant by whom one of the most important promises of the Abrahamic covenant would be fulfilled: “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed” (Genesis 12:3). The first verse in the Gospel of Matthew traces the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham (Matthew 1:1). Throughout the scriptures, Jesus Christ is to be understood as Abraham’s promised literal seed, whose atonement would bless all the peoples of the earth. In a sermon to the Jews in Jerusalem, Peter explained, “Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you” (Acts 3:25–26). The Book of Abraham clarifies that just as the Savior, the seed of Abraham, would bless the families of the earth, so too the numerous seed of Abraham will bless the world through the gospel (Abraham 2:9–11).

Abraham’s response: *12b ... and was glad, and his soul found rest, and he believed in the Lord; and the Lord counted it unto him for righteousness.*

The Hebrew word for *believed* (Hebrew hiphil for \*’MN) means “to think, be convinced that, believe, put trust in, rely upon, believe in, or have faith.”<sup>9</sup> Abraham has throughout his relationship manifested his faith and trust in the Lord through his obedience. Here, for the first time, he openly expresses his faith in the promises of the Lord—presumably those of his posterity, the land as an everlasting inheritance, and the coming of the Son of Man—two of which he would not see fulfilled in his lifetime.

The Lord acknowledges this statement of faith in the phrase *the Lord counted it unto him for righteousness*. The term *righteousness* (Hebrew *ṣəḏāqāh*) is important in the Bible: God is often described as “righteous” (Deuteronomy 32:4 [KJV, “just”]; Psalm 7:9), Noah was saved because he was “righteous” (Genesis 6:9; 7:1), and it is an important word in the story of Melchizedek in Genesis 14. The name Melchizedek (“King of Righteousness”) includes the word *righteousness*. In Genesis 14 JST, righteousness is a particular attribute of Melchizedek: “Now Melchizedek was a man of faith, who wrought righteousness” (Genesis 14:26 JST); and “this Melchizedek, having thus established righteousness, was called the king of heaven” (Genesis 14:36 JST). The people of Melchizedek also demonstrated this trait in the way they sought for the city of Enoch: “and his people wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven” (Genesis 14:34 JST).

In this passage, Genesis 15:6 (15:12 JST), we see Abraham, known for his great works, being praised for his faith. Similarly, the Son of God gave the priesthood to the faithful people of Melchizedek “unto as many as believed on

his name” (Genesis 14:29 JST). The New Testament quotes Genesis 15:6 several times in discussing the role of faith and works in justification. Both Paul and James quote the passage, although with very different emphases.

The apostle Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians. In both accounts, Paul teaches that the verse is essential for a proper understanding of the process by which man finds justification through grace (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6). Paul’s emphasis on the importance of faith is preserved in the JST, “For if Abraham were justified by the law of works, he hath to glory in himself; but not of God. For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him who is justified by the law of works, is the reward reckoned, not of grace, but of debt” (Romans 4:2–4 JST). Many Christians read these passages in Romans as an argument that man is saved by grace and not works.

James, on the other hand, quotes Genesis 15:6 to explain that while Abraham’s belief in God was imputed to him for righteousness, Abraham was justified by his works (James 2:20–24). James concludes from the story of Abraham that “by works a man is justified, and not by faith only” (James 2:24).

Interestingly enough, the passages in both Romans (4:2–5) and James (2:14–21) have significant JST changes that point out the importance of faith and works. The discussion in Romans 4 about Abraham’s faith and righteousness can perhaps best be summarized by Paul’s statement near the end of the chapter: “Therefore ye are justified of faith and works, through grace, to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to them only who are of the law, but to them also who are of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all” (Romans 4:16 JST). The JST of the James passage concludes, “Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how works wrought with his faith, and by works was faith made perfect?” (James 2:20–21 JST).

#### **4. The Blessing of Land (13–20)**

The Lord promises Abraham land:

*13 And the Lord said unto him, I, the Lord, brought thee out of Ur, of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.*

In this section, unlike the two preceding sections, Abraham’s question follows the Lord’s promise. The phrase *I, the Lord, brought thee out* (Hebrew hiphil of \*YŠ’) *of Ur, of the Chaldees* has many echoes in scripture. It is reminiscent of God’s initial command to Abraham, “Get thee out of thy country” (Genesis 12:1). Most important, it is the language used of the exodus: “I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out (also Hebrew hiphil of \*YŠ’) of the land of Egypt” (Exodus 20:2; cf. Deuteronomy 5:6), which event is prophesied in Genesis 15:17 JST.

The idea of the phrase *this land to inherit it* is important because the theology of the land in the Old Testament rests on the fact that the Lord owns the land. He told Israel, “The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine; for ye are strangers and sojourners with me” (Leviticus 25:23). The descendants of Abraham are thus heirs to the land, but the land belongs to the Lord.

Abraham’s third question: *14a And Abram said, Lord, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? yet he believed God.*

Abraham expresses his confidence in the Lord and at the same time asks how he will know that the promise of land will be fulfilled. Land is a central issue in the story of Abraham. One of Abraham’s critical tests was to leave his

native land in Ur and go to a promised land, where he would dwell the rest of his life. Ironically, Abraham would live his life as a stranger and a sojourner in this promised land; the only land that he would own would be a small cave that he purchased for the burial of his family (Genesis 23:3–20).

Third visual sign: 14b ... *And the Lord said unto him, Take me a heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon. 15 And he took unto him all these, and he divided them in the midst, and he laid each piece one against the other; but the birds divided he not. 16 And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, a great horror of darkness fell upon him. 17 And the Lord spake, and he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land which shall not be theirs, and shall serve strangers; and they shall be afflicted, and serve them four hundred years; and also that nation whom they shall serve will I judge; and afterwards shall they come out with great substance. 18 And thou shalt die, and go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. 19 But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. 20 And it came to pass, that when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp which passed between those pieces which Abram had divided.*

Known as the Covenant between the Pieces, the mysterious ritual described in this passage is unprecedented in scripture. Clearly this is intended to be a covenant ritual; covenants are often accompanied by the slaughter and sacrifice of animals. In Hebrew the idiom meaning “to make a covenant” is rendered to “cut a covenant,” as in the conclusion of the episode: “in that same day the Lord made a covenant (*kāraṭ bərit*) with Abram” (Genesis 15:21 JST). The drama is heightened by the setting: “the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, a great horror of darkness fell upon him” (Genesis 15:16 JST). While the first visual sign of the stars in the heaven appears to have taken place at night (Genesis 15:7 JST), the time of day is not specified for the beginning of this particular ritual (Genesis 15:14 JST),<sup>10</sup> but by verse 16 (JST) *the sun was going down*. The meaning of the symbols present in the ritual are explained in neither the biblical text nor the JST; hence, this passage has many different interpretations.

In short, the Lord commands Abraham to take five animals: *a heifer of three years old, a she goat, a ram, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon*, which he slaughters and cuts up. Abraham cuts the three big animals in two and arranges the pieces opposite each other; he doesn’t cut up the birds. When the sun goes down, *a deep sleep [comes] upon Abraham*. The Lord then speaks to Abraham and explains the future of his seed in relationship to the promised land. For four hundred years they will serve an unnamed master as *a stranger in a land which shall not be theirs*—almost certainly a reference to Israel’s sojourn in Egypt (Exodus 1–2). Afterwards they will come out *with great substance*—a promise fulfilled in Exodus 3:21–22; 12:36. *In the fourth generation* Abraham’s posterity will come and inherit the promised land because by then the iniquity of the Amorites will be full. The Lord promises Abraham a long life and a peaceful death. Then, dramatically, when the sun goes down and it becomes dark, the Lord, represented by a *smoking furnace* and a *burning lamp*, passes between the pieces that Abraham has divided.

Scholars have turned to other biblical and extrabiblical evidence to find useful parallels that aid in the interpretation of this ritual. Three of the most common interpretations include the ritual as a covenant ratification sacrifice, as a symbolic representation of the history of Israel, and as a visual enactment of an oath of self-imprecation.<sup>11</sup>

**1. Covenant ratification sacrifice.** This view is championed by Gerhard F. Hasel, who has examined extrabiblical texts describing sacrifice and concluded that examples of political treaties (one of the most



common forms of ancient covenants) from Mari and Alalakh in the eighteenth century b.c. were accompanied and ratified by ceremonies that involved the killing of animals. He notes that the language of sacrifice in other Near Eastern cultures from the period of Abraham describes the ratification of a treaty or covenant similarly, “to kill (cut) an ass” (Akkadian *hayaram qatalum*), similar to Hebrew “to cut a covenant” (Genesis 15:21 JST). Hasel summarizes this view, “The killing and sectioning of the animals by Abram is the sacrificial *preparatio* for the subsequent divine *ratificatio* of the covenant by Yahweh who in passing between the pieces irrevocably pledges the fulfillment of his covenant promise to the patriarch.”<sup>12</sup>

2. *Symbolic representation of the history of Israel.* Gordon J. Wenham interprets this ritual as a dramatization of the history of Abraham’s posterity until they inherit the promised land,<sup>13</sup> “a solemn and visual reaffirmation of the covenant.”<sup>14</sup> Drawing on the recent anthropological work of Mary Douglas, he notes that ancient Israel saw “a close relationship between the animal world and the human world.”<sup>15</sup> He thus equates the five sacrificial animals taken by Abraham to correspond with “clean men,” or ancient Israel, and the birds of prey, or the “unclean animals,” with the Gentiles. Abraham driving away the birds of prey, according to this view, symbolizes Abraham’s protection of his posterity. This action is perhaps both a reference to Abraham’s past military foray against the Mesopotamian kings in Genesis 14 and to the future divine protection of his posterity from destruction by the Egyptians, from whom the Lord would eventually deliver his people. Perhaps it also represents the future inhabitants of the land of Canaan. The furnace of fire and the torch passing through the pieces represent the promise that the Lord would walk among Abraham’s posterity (Leviticus 26:12). So just as Abraham’s life would prefigure the future of his people, so this ceremony would prefigure the relationship of God with Abraham’s posterity.

3. *Covenant oath ceremony of self-imprecation.* Many biblical commentators understand this ritual in light of a similar oath ceremony in Jeremiah 34:18–19, in which the leading citizens in Jerusalem make a covenant and pass between the parts of a calf.<sup>16</sup> During the reign of Zedekiah the people of Jerusalem had sworn an oath to release their slaves. This oath is described in Jeremiah 34:18: “they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof.” Oaths in the Bible often include implied curses upon the individual swearing the oath should they fail to comply with the terms of the oath. A common oath formula included a phrase, “the Lord do so to me, and more also” (Ruth 1:17) if the individual did or did not do a certain thing (cf. 1Samuel 3:17; 14:44; 2Samuel 3:35).<sup>17</sup> Thus the Lord decrees destruction on those in Jerusalem who have not kept their oath, “The men who have violated my covenant . . . I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces” (Jeremiah 34:18 NIV). Scholars suppose those who passed between the pieces of the calf proclaimed something like, “May God do to me [i.e., what had been done to the animal] and more also, if I do not faithfully keep the terms of the covenant.”

In ancient Near Eastern parallels to such a ritual, a vassal swears allegiance to a sovereign power in a political treaty using a similar oath. One example from the first millennium B.C., a period much later than Abraham, is found in the Aramaic inscription Sefire I. Bir-Ga’yah, king of KTK, makes a treaty with Matī’el king of Arpad, in which possible infractions by Matī’el are expressed: “[Just as] this calf is cut in two, so may Matī’el be cut in two, and may his nobles be cut in two!”<sup>18</sup>

Further evidence for such oaths of self-imprecation is found in the Book of Mormon. During Moroni’s call to his people to defend their liberties, his people promise to defend their liberty “rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God,” and if they did, “the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments” (Alma 46:21). In the same episode the people “cast their garments at the feet of Moroni” with the self-imprecation “if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression” (Alma 46:22).

If indeed this ritual is one of self-imprecation, here is a unique and unprecedented scene of the Lord God of Israel taking the role of the vassal and swearing a most solemn oath in which he takes upon himself the sanctions of the pieces of the animals and confirms the promise of the land to Abraham.<sup>19</sup>

*18 And thou shalt die, and go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.*

Clearly one of the issues on Abraham's mind throughout this chapter is that he is getting old and close to dying. He has already contemplated the possibility of Eliezer as his heir (Genesis 15:3 JST), has asked the Lord how he will have an everlasting inheritance, though he will die (Genesis 15:9–10 JST), and has questioned his role in the future history of his people. The promise that Abraham shall go to his fathers in peace (Hebrew *šālôm*) may be a play on Genesis 14:17 JST, where Melchizedek is the king of Salem (Hebrew *šālēm*), and 14:33 JST “he [Melchizedek] obtained peace in Salem, and was called the Prince of peace.” All this is significant in light of Abraham's statement of his quest in the Book of Abraham, “having been myself a follower of righteousness, desiring also to be one who possessed great knowledge, and to be a greater follower of righteousness, and to possess a greater knowledge, and to be a father of many nations, a prince of peace” (Abraham 1:2). Thus in Genesis 15 JST Abraham is compared in righteousness and peace to Melchizedek.

*19 But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.*

Four generations is most likely to be understood as a restatement of the four hundred years in Genesis 15:17. Strictly speaking, the length of a *generation* in the Bible is the length of the time between the birth of parents and the birth of their children—a period of 15–25 years. But in order to make this statement compatible with the four hundred years in Genesis 15:17 JST, perhaps the term *generation* signifies the lifetime of a person (70–140 years).<sup>20</sup>

The concept that Israel needs to wait until the *iniquity of the Amorites* is full is clarified in the Book of Mormon: “but behold, this people had rejected every word of God, and they were ripe in iniquity and the fulness of the wrath of God was upon them” (1Nephi 17:35).

The Book of Abraham teaches that the promise of the land to Abraham's posterity was conditional, “I will give unto thy seed after thee for an everlasting possession, when they hearken to my voice” (Abraham 2:6). When the iniquity of the descendants of Abraham was full, God would allow them to be destroyed and scattered from their promised land as well (1Nephi 17:43; cf. Alma 10:19; Ether 2:9–10).

*20 ... behold, a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp which passed between those pieces which Abram had divided.*

Almost all commentators agree that the *smoking furnace* and the *burning lamp* are symbols that represent the presence of the Lord. It may be a case of hendiadys,<sup>21</sup> where both symbols are meant to refer to the same entity. Similar language is used of the presence of the Lord on Sinai, “fire” and “smoke of a furnace” (Exodus 19:18; 20:18), and in the “pillar of a cloud” and “pillar of fire” in the wilderness (Exodus 13:21). If indeed this is a covenant self-imprecation ceremony, the *smoking furnace* and the *burning lamp* represent the Lord swearing to a solemn and touching oath regarding the land. If this is a historical representation, then it illustrates the Lord's promise of his presence in the midst of his people, as dramatized later by the pillar of cloud and fire in the exodus and by the symbolism of the presence of God in the tabernacle and the temple.

## 5. The Lord Makes a Covenant with Abraham (21–22)

21 And in that same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river Euphrates; 22 The Kenites, and the Kenazites, and the Kadmonites, and Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims, and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.

As I mentioned earlier, the language *the Lord made a covenant* is literally “cut a covenant,” emphasizing the connection between sacrifice and covenant making. From the beginning Adam and Eve offered sacrifice in similitude of the Lamb of God.

In history the closest Israel ever came to conquering these ideal borders *from the river of Egypt unto the great river Euphrates* was in the time of David and Solomon (2Samuel 8:3; 1Kings 4:21).

This is the longest of the seventeen lists in the Bible of the peoples who inhabited the promised land before the conquest.<sup>22</sup> The Book of Abraham refers to the promised land as “the land of Canaan” (Abraham 2:15–18). The Book of Mormon never mentions the Canaanites but refers to “the children of this land” (1Nephi 17:33).

### Conclusion

**A careful reading of Genesis 15 in light of modern revelation, in particular the Joseph Smith Translation, teaches us much. First and foremost, chapter 15 reveals a dynamic relationship between God and Abraham—a relationship in which Abraham can discuss the feelings and concerns of his heart with God, who hears and answers him.**

The promises of the Abrahamic covenant pronounced in chapter 15—posterity, eternal inheritance, and land—are clarified by a study of the account of the blessing of Melchizedek restored in Genesis 14:25–40 JST. The whole of Genesis 15 is enriched by an understanding that Abraham seeks to model himself after Melchizedek.

Throughout the Abrahamic narratives, the Lord commands and promises, and Abraham faithfully obeys. But in chapter 15 the roles are somewhat reversed. Here it is Abraham who questions the Lord and his promises, and it is the Lord who confirms them in a dramatic fashion by passing through the pieces of the sacrifice. Throughout these narratives Abraham repeatedly proves his righteousness through his acts, but in chapter 15 he proves his righteousness through his faith. In chapter 15 Abraham provides for his posterity the model of faith by believing in those promises that are not readily believable: that he will have literal seed from his body, although he and his wife are getting old; that he will be resurrected through the sacrifice of the Son of Man and will possess the land as an everlasting inheritance; and that in the future his posterity would come out of bondage to possess the land. The righteousness of Abraham in chapter 15 lies in his trust, confidence, and faith in the Lord’s promises, and the Lord’s promises are sealed with a solemn oath when he passes between the pieces.

### Notes

1. Rabbinic tradition preserves several different lists of these trials. The Mishnah records, “With ten trials was Abraham, our father, proved, and he stood [firm] in them all; to make known how great was the love of Abraham, our father (peace be upon him).” J. Israelstam, trans., *Aboth* 5.3, in *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezeḳin*, ed. Isidore Epstein (London: Soncino, 1935), 59–60. A convenient summary and review of the rabbinic material can be found in the *Babylonian Talmud*, *ibid.*, 59.

2. Interestingly enough, according to one rabbinic tradition, Abraham’s first test occurred when he was cast into a furnace in Ur and came out unscathed, having been saved by the archangel Michael. See *Midrash Rabbah* Genesis

64:13 (London: Soncino, 1983), 369; and *Aboth* 5:3, in *The Babylonian Talmud: Seder Nezeḳin*, 59. See also John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, eds., *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001). Rabbinic tradition preserves different lists of the tests. According to I ARN [Aboth de Rabbi Natan], they include: “Two trials at the time he was bidden to leave Haran, two with his two sons, two with his two wives, one in the wars of the Kings, one at the covenant ‘between the pieces’ (Gen. XV), one in Ur of the Chaldees.” Another tradition in “II ARN [Aboth de Rabbi Natan] Ch. XXXVI speaks of ten trials, but names only nine: (i) at Ur; (ii) *Get thee out of thy land* ... (Gen. XII, 1); (iii) The famine when he left Haran (ibid. v. 10); (iv) Sarah at Pharaoh’s palace; (v) Sarah at Abimelech’s; (vi) Circumcision; (vii) The covenant ‘between the pieces’; (viii) With Isaac; (ix) With Ishmael.” Ibid., 59 n. 6. The Book of Abraham preserves the story of Abraham being delivered by an angel from sacrifice on an altar where he was offered for sacrifice with the consent of his own father Terah (Abraham 1:1–17; Facsimile 1).

3. Recent and excellent commentaries on Genesis include Walter Brueggeman, *Genesis* (Atlanta: Knox, 1982); Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990); J.Gerald Janzen, *Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993); Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989); and Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1987).

4. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 5:555.

5. Unfortunately, because the biblical events recounted in the narrative in the Book of Abraham end with Abraham in Egypt (Genesis 12:10–13 = Abraham 2:21–25), the Book of Abraham has no information about Genesis 14 or 15.

6. Because the Latter-day Saint edition of the King James Version of the Bible does not reproduce the entire text, Genesis 15 JST is quoted from *The Holy Scriptures: Inspired Version* (Independence, Mo.: Herald Publishing House, 1974), 34–35.

7. Josephus says of Abraham, “Berosus mentions our father Abraham, without naming him, in these terms: ‘In the tenth generation after the flood there lived among the Chaldeans a just man and great and versed in celestial lore.’” Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.158, in *Josephus*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 79.

8. See the Joseph Smith statement in *History of the Church*, 5:555, note 4 above.

9. William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 20.

10. This might suggest that the events in chapter 15 of Genesis occurred over a period of two days.

11. The various interpretations are discussed by Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite in Gen. 15,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 19 (February 1981): 61–78.

12. Ibid., 70.

13. Gordon J. Wenham, “The Symbolism of the Animal Rite in Genesis 15: A Response to G. F. Hasel,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 22 (February 1982): 134–37. Wenham explains his interpretation further in his

commentary on Genesis in *Genesis 1–15*, 330–35.

14. “It is not a dramatised curse that would come into play should the covenant be broken, but a solemn and visual reaffirmation of the covenant that is essentially a promise.” Wenham, “Response,” 136.

15. *Ibid.*, 134.

16. It should be noted that some scholars do not believe that the ritual in Jeremiah 34:18–19 is a useful parallel to the ritual in Genesis 15, due to the differences in setting and details between the two narratives; see Hasel, “The Meaning of the Animal Rite,” 62–63. Those scholars who dislike the interpretation of the ritual in Genesis 15 as a divine self-imprecation also often cite the fact that they are not comfortable with God calling “upon himself divine sanctions.” *Ibid.*, 64.

17. For a concise discussion of biblical oaths, see M. H. Pope, “Oaths,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 3:575–77.

18. Translation from Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967), 14–15, as found in Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, 1–17*, 432. For another example of such rituals in the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon, see Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis*, 432.

19. Elsewhere the Lord swears by himself (Genesis 22:16; 26:3) or by his life (Numbers 14:21).

20. Sarna, *Genesis*, 116.

21. Hendiadys is a Greek term that literally means “one by means of two.” It is a term for a figure of speech in which two nouns are joined by a conjunction (usually “and”) to express a single idea instead of a noun with an adjective. Examples in the Bible include “[they] buried him [Samuel] in *Ramah, even in his own city*” (1Samuel 28:3, emphasis added), meaning his own city Ramah; “thou hast prepared *the light and the sun*” (Psalm 74:16, emphasis added), meaning the sunlight.

22. The other lists mention seven, six, five, or three ethnic groups. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 117 and 359 n. 3.