

# Fire and Smoke Between the Pieces

- <sup>7</sup> And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."  
<sup>8</sup> But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"  
<sup>9</sup> He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon."  
<sup>10</sup> And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. [he did pinch off their heads]  
<sup>11</sup> And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.  
<sup>12</sup> As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.  
<sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.  
<sup>14</sup> But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.  
<sup>15</sup> As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.  
<sup>16</sup> And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."  
<sup>17</sup> When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.  
<sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,  
<sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,  
<sup>20</sup> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,  
<sup>21</sup> the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."

Genesis 15: 7-21

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## A Question of Faith

Questions, questions. Since faith involves what it does not see, to live a life of faith will naturally involve a life of **questions**. To be sure, faith is being **certain** of what it does not see. That certainty involves believing in the LORD who promises what he says. But it does not mean that it never asks questions. Moses asked, "**How then shall Pharaoh listen to me**" (**Ex 6:12**)? Job asks, "**Why do you not pardon my transgression and take away my iniquity**" (**Job 7:21**)? David asked, "**How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever**" (**Ps 13:1**)? Even the martyred saints in heaven cry out, "**O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth**" (**Rev 6:10**)? It is natural to ask God questions.

When Hebrews says that faith is the conviction of things not seen, it is speaking to us today. But what is amazing is that the men I've mentioned here **actually saw** the object of their faith, if not the promises that came from him. As we saw last time, the LORD often appeared to their eyes. This is certainly true of Abram. **Genesis 15:1** begins by saying that the Word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision.

The chapter contains two parallel sections, at least in the way they are framed:

Outline of Genesis 15				
<b>The Word's word</b>	v 1	Promise of reward	v 7	Promise of land
<b>Abram's word</b>	vv 2–3	Complaint about childlessness	v 8	Guarantee requested
<b>Yahweh's reaction</b>	v 4	Promise of heir	v 9	Oath rite commanded
<b>Public act</b>	v 5	Taken into open	vv 16–17	Oath rite carried out
<b>Yahweh's word</b>	v 5	Promise of many descendants	vv 13–16	Promise of land for descendants
<b>Conclusion</b>	v 6	Abram's faith	vv 18–21	Yahweh's covenant <sup>1</sup>

These parallel sections have Abram asking **two different questions**. He asks a question about **his future seed**. “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus” (**Gen 15:2**)? Then he asks a question about possessing **the land**. “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess the land” (**Gen 15:8**)?

Both questions are prompted by something going on at that moment, as well as by something that has happened in the past. In the past, the LORD came to Abram and promised him a seed (**12:7**; **13:15-16**) and a land (**12:7**; **13:15**). But those promises have not yet come to pass. These unfulfilled promises have put a seed of questioning into Abram's mind. As for the present situation, both questions are prompted by the Word coming to Abram. For you see, unlike you and I who have Christ come to us through the word proclaimed and read in the Scripture, they actually had the Word come to them in a person, and this gave them the ability to actually ask God questions that he could then answer audibly.

When the Word first comes, he promises Abram that he will be **his shield and reward** (**Gen 15:1**). This **war language** was prompted by the great military victory that the Most High had just won for Abram in the giant wars. This gave Abram a chance to ask about that promise of a seed that he was given. After the Word reaffirms that he will have a seed from his own body, and we are told that Abram **believed him**, we read the opening verse of our passage today.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 325.

## A Mighty Covenant

### *Preface to the Covenant*

**Gen 15:7** parallels **15:1**. In the earlier verse, the Word promises Abram a reward. In the later verse, he promises him the land (now for the third time in the book). But notice the language that is used to introduce this promise: “**And he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.’**” This verse begins a series of verses that will foreshadow things that will take place many years in the future. Does the language, “**I am the LORD who brought you out from...**” remind you of anything you will read about in the days of Moses?

This is the very same language that is used to introduce the Ten Commandments, which are themselves called a covenant. “**And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments**” (**Ex 34:28**). The formal part of the Ten Commandments begin, “**I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**” (**Ex 20:2; Deut 5:6**). What this language to Abram signals to us then, is that the Word is about to **enter into a covenant with Abram**. (It also shows that the God who entered into covenant with Moses was this same Word of the LORD). But there is a great difference between these covenants. The difference is between a covenant of law/works rooted in grace vs. a covenant of grace only. What we are going to see is that unlike the Ten Commandments, there is nothing in Genesis 15 that Abram will be commanded to do. It is pure and simple God’s gracious condescension to Abram to promise what he wants to promise and to grant the fulfillment of what he promises.

### *A Question*

But first, Abram asks God that question, “**O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it**” (**Gen 15:8**)? Abram wants proof that he can believe God’s word. This is remarkable both for its bold **audacity**, and for the fact that faith is rooted in **evidence**. As for its audacity, can you imagine yourself being bold enough to say to God himself, “**What will you give me to prove it?**” But that is essentially what Abram is asking for. “**I believe you, LORD. But what can I hang my hat on? I know your word is good, but is there some kind of a sign you can give me that I can look to?**” As for the proof or evidence that the LORD decides to give Abram, for this we want to turn to the next few verses.

### *Preparation for a Covenant Ceremony*

**Genesis 15:9** now says, “**Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and young pigeon.**” There are **five animals** mentioned here. The list covers all those species that could be offered in

sacrifice.<sup>2</sup> As such, all of them would later be considered “clean” in the law of Moses. Thus, what we find the LORD asking for is almost certainly animals for a sacrifice of some kind.

Vs. 10 now says that “He brought him all these.” Keep in mind that Abram is awake. Though he is seeing a vision of some kind, he is not yet asleep. The language of bringing animals to the LORD is physical language, which means that the LORD is somewhere physically located. Abram had to bring the animals somewhere. This fits with what we saw last week that the Word of the LORD is embodied somehow. So Abram brings these five animals to the Word.

He then “cut them [each] in half” (10). Five animals cut in half would make ten pieces. However, it says “But he did not cut the birds in half.” That might give us a total of eight pieces. But the common practice when killing a bird for sacrifice was to pinch off its head. That means that while Abram did not cut the birds in half, there still may have actually been ten rather than eight pieces, if the heads were counted.<sup>3</sup> We will see the significance of this later.

Why did he cut the animals in half? It was so that he could lay “each half over against the other” (10). What we have here is a kind of dry land equivalent of the Red Sea parting. There is a separation—a wall of smelly, bloody carcass parts lined up head to head on either side, creating gory Red Carpet pathway down the middle, whereby someone might stroll through if they chose. In fact, this is part of an ancient near eastern ritual that a king would perform for another king.

### *Oath Ceremony*

What is about to happen is the enactment of a solemn oath. Word and action are part of the oath.<sup>4</sup> But the one about to make the oath is not Abram. It is one like Melchizedek in the previous chapter. It is the superior king. This king is none other than the LORD himself (who, as we saw, may very well be the same Melchizedek, though the text here is not concerned with calling him the “king of righteousness and peace” because in mind is something else that this King will do).

Hebrews tells us about God making an oath. “When God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and

<sup>2</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 331.

<sup>3</sup> “The ten parts of the animals would refer to the ten nations to be dispossessed. (In some translations it appears that there are only eight parts since the birds are not divided. The verbs in 15:10, however, more likely indicate that the larger animals are cut in half whereas the two birds are not, but instead, just have their heads pinched off according to standard practice).” John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 85 and n. 355.

<sup>4</sup> Claus Westermann, *A Continental Commentary: Genesis 12–36* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 225.

steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb 6:17-20). God will make a formal oath in order to give strong encouragement to Abram, and to show more convincingly his unchangeable character that when he says something, he follows through, even though it may not be on Abram’s time table.

This oath is not just for him though, for as Hebrews says, it is also **for us who have fled for refuge to Christ** in the flesh. In other words, it is as I said earlier that faith is supported by evidence and proof. God does not leave our faith hopelessly in the dark, even though it very often times is quite literally, in the dark. So when you see God making an oath, you are to sit up and take notice, for this sworn promise is for your sake so that your faith might be supported by that which is sure and firm—the very Word of God himself.

#### *Driving the Unclean Birds Away*

Before the Word makes his oath, however, one more thing occurs. As I said, the pieces were stinky and decomposition in such a hot climate would not take long to begin. The pieces were out in the open. Where there are pieces of dead, rotting flesh, there will always be **birds of prey** not far behind. These birds differ in the law of Moses from the turtledove and the pigeon, for all birds of prey are ceremonially **unclean** animals. Ravens, vultures, eagles, who knows what birds smelled a chance for an easy meal. They began to circle. Soon, they began to swoop as they tried to feast upon their gruesome meal.

But **Abram drove them away** (Gen 15:11). This is mentioned because of the symbolism that is going to be associated with the ritual and the words that will accompany it. But for now, we are not yet prepared to see what Abram’s actions here mean. So we continue.

#### *Deep, Dark, Dreadful Sleep*

Abram has been hard at work all day. The previous night he was taken outside and shown the stars of the heaven. The LORD said that his offspring would be like those stars, so numerous that no one could count them. In the morning, he asked Abram to bring him these animals. So Abram found just the right animals. He killed those animals. He prepared those animals. He bought those animals to the LORD. Then, apparently, he waited. While he waited, the birds came in for their grizzly feast.

But the LORD has not shown up. So now the sun is going down (Gen 15:12) and Abram is getting tired. It says, “**A deep sleep fell on Abram.**” He was overcome with something he was not prepared for. He is **no longer awake**. But his sleep was

not restful. Instead, “Behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him” (15). This is the first time the word “dreadful” has appeared in the Bible. The next time it appears is in the Exodus, when “terror and dread” fell upon the Egyptians as the waters of the Red Sea descended upon them, drowning the armies of Pharaoh (Ex 15:16). We have seen darkness once before, in Genesis 1 when darkness was over the earth. The next time darkness appears, is also in Egypt, when the LORD send a plague of darkness upon the whole land (Ex 10:15-22). Thus, these words are more foreshadowing of things to come.

Let me also remind you of what also happens later in the Exodus story when it says, “You heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire” (Deut 5:23). The mountain on fire and in darkness was Mt. Sinai, the very mountain where God would give the Ten Commandments. As we have seen, this was also when God gave a covenant to Israel. When he gave the covenant, he did so in terrifying darkness so that even Moses trembled in fear (Ex 19:16; Heb 12:21). What was the purpose of this dreadful darkness for Abram? He was about to see something that could only be seen in such a state as deep sleep. He was about to see the LORD in a way he had never seen before.

#### *Dreadful Covenant Promise*

First, Yahweh speaks to Abram. “Know for certain that your offspring/seed will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years” (Gen 15:13). This is a prophesy that as far as Abram knows, is in the indeterminate future. “Where will this land be? Will I go there?” It is unsettling news. “Servants? Affliction? Why Lord GOD?” But faith receives all kinds of news from the LORD, even if it may not particularly like it.

Being a Christian is not about only getting good things. “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10), Job says this to his wife after losing his shelter, his servants, his sheep, his sons, and his strength, all at the instigation of the LORD! Too many Christians have this idea—whether they are born with it or hear it in their churches—that the Christian life is the High Life. But that’s not Christianity, that’s Miller Time. That’s an advertising slogan for a beer company, not a promise from the Word of God. What do you do when you get bad news? Surely, the dread and darkness descends upon you. But what happens to your faith in Christ? Do you automatically being to *and doubt*, or do you return to the Word and rely upon the Rock of your salvation all the more?

What we learn at the end of Genesis is that his grandson Jacob will go down to Egypt and as Exodus picks up, they are in the land for four hundred years, where they are increasingly used and abused by the Pharaoh’s, eventually becoming slaves



who have to cry out to God for deliverance. We also learn that God does this so that he might be glorified in delivering Israel from an impossible situation.

Abram gets some of this news even now. For him, it is all **good news**. It comes in **four parts**. First, “**I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve**” (**Gen 15:14**). Even as early as Abram we discover that forcing servitude upon a people is immoral. There are different kinds of servitude, of course. Sometimes, you have to pay back your debt to society or to an employer. But other times, as we have seen even in the sad history of the modern world, people inhumanely force slavery upon others for reasons that are evil: control, power, racism. God brings judgment upon the nations that do such things, but especially when those people are his chosen people. The good news is for Abram is that his descendants will be vindicated. God will judge the nation that abuses them.

Second, “**... and afterward they shall come out with great possessions**” (**14**). When the Israelites plunder the Egyptians (**Ex 12:36**) at the Exodus, this was prophesied long ago to Abram. But why would God mention this here? Because he is trying to ensure Abram that not only will he have offspring, but that he will be their reward as well. He will supply their needs too. But will Abram have to worry about any of this happening to himself? No.

Third, “**As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age**” (**Gen 15:15**). Abram will not personally have to worry about being taken captive by this unknown nation. He will not become their servant. Certainly, this was good news to him, even though it must have made him wonder about the future.

Fourth, “**And they shall come back here in the fourth generation.**” Though they will go into slavery in a different land, God will return them to the land Abram is in now. They will come back to Canaan. God will indeed carry out his promise to give Abram and his descendants this land. He will fulfill his word.

But **why will all of this happen so far into the future?** Why not now? How many times do we ask questions like this? When will you help Lord? Why are you so slow in keeping your promises? Have you forgotten me? Do you not hear from heaven? The last part of **vs. 16** is very important in that it shows that God takes into consideration many more things than you or I. We are often only concerned with ourselves. But God has his eye on the world. **The eyes of the LORD** see everyone.

“**For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete**” (**Gen 15:16**). Abram knows who the Amorites are. Mamre, Eschol, and Aner are his Amorite allies in this very spot that the LORD appears. The Amorites were one of the giant clans that were destroyed by the kings of the east back in ch. 14. Og and Sihon in the days of

Moses and Joshua were Amorites. Apparently, these people were very wicked. In fact, this is what we find throughout the law of Moses.

The Israelites were not to practice the detestable practices of the inhabitants of Canaan. “You shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods” (Deut 20:17-18). I put these practices into four categories: false worship, sexual immorality, sins of “crossing over” into the spirit world, and various forms of oppression. The list is long and includes things like putting up sacred poles, using carved images, burning children in the fire to the gods, cutting the body and tattooing for the dead, religious prostitution, incest, bestiality, homosexuality, adultery, fornication, necromancy, fortune telling, interpreting omens, sorcery, using mediums and astrologers, eating blood, divination, neglecting and harming the poor, using unfair wages, robbery, slander, gossip, hatred, disrespecting the old, and unjust weights and measures. If you wonder what sins the LORD is talking about to Abram, these are surely among them.

It is also a fascinating idea that there is a certain level of sinfulness that God seems to put up with here. Their iniquity is not yet complete. They must go farther in their sin, before God judges them. This displays the incredible patience and longsuffering that the LORD has even with the most wicked of people on the earth. And it ought to inform our own theological thinking when contemplating the great depths of sin to which the church, America, and the Western world have fallen into exponentially increasing over, especially, these past 50 years, dozen years, three or four years. Apparently, God is not yet at his end with us, and therefore, be encouraged to pray for the church to be bold to proclaim the good news to many people before the dreadful day of the Lord finally comes to us.

#### *Covenant Confirmation and Covenant Witness*

At this point, God stops speaking to the sleeping Abram. Now he begins to move. Genesis 15:17-18 is one of those remarkable, amazing verses in the Bible. It is rich in meaning, symbolism, and gospel. It is one of the most important verses in all of Abram’s life. And it is important that you understand it as he would have.

“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.” Let’s get the scene clearly in our minds, then we will try to figure out what it is teaching. We have 10 severed pieces of animals, lined up



in five rows, with enough space between these bloody, stinking, rotting pieces for someone (or something) to walk. It is dark. The sun has set. This double darkness adds to the dreadful darkness of Abram's sleep.

Into this darkness, smoke begins to rise, further clouding the already gloomy, black air. Suddenly, out of the midst of the darkness and smoke, a fire pot can be seen. How can Abram see it? Because a fire lights up the ground. A flaming torch is here. Perhaps the size of a small pottery kiln, the pot begins to move. How does it move? The fire pot and torch begin to walk between the severed piece of the animals, like Israel walking through the Sea.

But they are not moving by themselves. Someone else is here, someone that can't be made out. Someone who must be holding these things, someone who is in the midst of the smoke and fire. Out of the smoke and fire, the LORD speaks, "To your offspring/seed I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates" (Gen 15:18). Then, in the longest list of the names of the clans inhabiting the land of Canaan, we have ten nations: "The Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites" (19-21). Some of these names were giant clans beaten by Chedorlaomer in the previous chapter. Others are common names in lists of six or seven that we find scattered throughout Exodus-Judges. A few are mentioned only here, and the reasons why are lost to history. So let's figure out what is going on. What does this scene and speech teach us about the covenant, the promise, and God himself? Let me give you four things to think about. I'll take the ten nations first.

Scholars have asked why there might be ten nations, when the usual length of lists of these people contain usually six or seven. Since this is by far the longest list of its type of these people groups, could this number be significant? This is where the *Bible Backgrounds Commentaries* explanation that the sacrificed birds had their heads pinched off, thereby making ten pieces is probably significant. These ten pieces would be related to these ten nations that will be dispossessed of their land.

Recall also how we saw that the animals Abram brought to the LORD were all *clean* animals, but how the birds Abram had to shoo away were all *unclean*. Wenham, who is not given to allegory, writes:

The use of sacrificial terminology in v 9 suggests that the rite should be interpreted using the categories underlying other OT rituals. It then becomes clear that the sacrificial animals must represent Israel or its priestly leaders (M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* [London: Routledge, 1966]; cf. Jacob). The birds of prey represent

unclean nations, Gentiles, possibly Egypt (so Cazelles). Thus Abram's actions in driving away the birds represent his defending his descendants against foreign attackers. This may look back to his defeat of the kings in chap. 14, but more probably it looks forward to their deliverance from Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

This seems very plausible to me, especially when I think about a verse like this, “On that day I will make the clans of Judah like a blazing pot in the midst of wood, like a flaming torch among sheaves. And they shall devour to the right and to the left all the surrounding peoples, while Jerusalem shall again be inhabited in its place, in Jerusalem” (Zech 12:6).

We can see the relationship of the severed pieces to the nations. In Genesis 15, the Word will drive the nations out of the land hundreds of years later. For these unclean Gentiles will surround and attack God's covenant people, and will have to be destroyed for their evil ways. This also prefigures the ultimate battle when Satan will gather the nations against the church, only to find himself thrown into the lake of fire after he is released from his millennial chains just before the end of all things (Rev 20:7ff).

Thus, we have at the heart of this covenant, the sworn oath of God to fight for Abram and Israel and the church. It is one sided. God will do these things. It is a military promise, truly gospel if ever it was given. He will fight for them when they can't fight for themselves. He will defeat their enemies when their enemies are too numerous, too tall, too strong for little Israel to stand up against. He will be their shield. He will lead them through the darkness and the waters. And so this list relates back to the wars of the previous chapter, and looks forward to the Exodus. And, this promise would not merely be for Abram, or for biological Jews, but for any who call Abram their Father, for he is the father of all who have faith in Christ. This promise, if you hold Christ dear, is for you.

The second thing I want you to think about is the imagery of fire and smoke and darkness and a voice calling out from their midst. What does it represent? Here is how the Ten Commandments begin in Deuteronomy 5:2ff.

The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today. The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the midst of the fire, while I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD. For you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up into the mountain. He said: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

<sup>5</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 332.

Curiously, what is Egypt called elsewhere? She is called the “Iron Furnace.” “But the LORD has taken you and brought you out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own inheritance, as you are this day” (Deut 4:20; cf. 1 Kgs 8:51; Jer 11:4). Remember that we have in our story a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch and darkness and covenant words, “I am the LORD who brought you out...”

Egypt certainly created its own kind of dread and terror, mostly for the tyranny it produced, like all evil world empires do. But the true dread, the true fear is created by God, not because he is tyrannical or evil or a hard task master, but simply because he is completely other. He is God and we are not. He is holy, and we are sinful. He is good, and we are evil. He is immense, we are puny. He is powerful, we are weak. He is King, we are peasants. Dread comes upon people when they stand in God’s presence for these reasons.

It is not a happy-clappy place to be in the presence of God in his glory. It is absolutely terrifying. People do not sing, “Burn your fire in my heart” or “Light up our church with your Holy Spirit fire” to softly swaying harmonies of worship leaders up on stages and an audience full of open lighters waiting for an encore. No, in the Bible, people want to die. They cover their faces. They hide themselves anyway they can. They plead for mercy. They beg for forgiveness.

God often comes in just these phenomena. The Angel of the LORD came to Moses in a bush that was burning from a fire that did not consume, and Moses laid himself flat on the ground when he figured out what was going on. God came to Mt. Sinai in dreadful darkness, thick smoke, and blazing fire. What was the people’s response? Moses, “You speak to God for us, or we will die.”

Why? Remember that God says he is a consuming fire (Deut 4:24; Heb 12:29)? John the Baptist said people would be baptized with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matt 3:11). Then, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends like tongues of fire. But people today have too cozy a view of the Holy Spirit, as their song about him and fire indicate.

Listen to Zechariah. “And the angel who talked with me came again and woke me, like a man who is awakened out of his sleep. And he said to me, ‘What do you see?’ I said, ‘I see, and behold, a lampstand all of gold, with a bowl on the top of it, and seven lamps on it, with seven lips on each of the lamps that are on the top of it’ ... I said to the angel who talked with me, ‘What are these, my lord?’ Then the angel who talked with me answered and said to me, ‘Do you not know what these are?’ I said, ‘No, my lord.’ Then he said to me, ‘This is the

word of the LORD to Zerubbabel: Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts” (Zech 4:1-2, 4-6).

You might say, what does that have to do with what we are talking about? Listen to Revelation’s interpretation, “From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God” (Rev 4:5). Meredith Kline comments on this:

The biblical roots of this symbolism can be traced to God's covenant-ratifying appearance to Abraham in the menorah-like form of fire-pan and torch with their ascending columns of flame and smoke (Gen. 15:17). This anticipated the two fiery columns of the Glory-cloud theophany at the exodus.”<sup>6</sup>

You see, the torch image of the burning bush, the tabernacle’s Lampstand, the mountain of fire, and Genesis 15’s torch and smoke is God’s Holy Spirit. His presence is wonderful, but it is not to be played with or taken lightly. Kline again says,

The fire in the burning bush is not symbolic of the fiery trials of oppressed Israel, but is the manifestation of the presence of the Lord, who is a consuming fire (Exod. 19:18; 24:17; Deut. 4:24; cf. Deut. 33:16) ... At Sinai a covenant was established between Yahweh and Israel as a nation, a covenant that brought the consuming fiery Presence of the Lord of Glory into the midst of the covenant community.<sup>7</sup>

There is a fascinating personification of the Holy Spirit that some have suggested here. The cloud and fire are called “pillars” (Ex 13:22) in Exodus, and from inside those pillars, the Angel of the LORD fights for Israel (Ex 14:19). Here, too, we have pillars of smoke and fire. So someone writes, “They represent anthropomorphically the legs of God ... as he stands there to take an oath.”<sup>8</sup>

What I want to suggest is that there are two heavenly persons in Abram’s fit-filled dream. The Word of the LORD who speaks the covenant, and the Holy Spirit who is represented in the smoke and fire, a terrifying figuring or light and heat. Both are standing before our father in the faith. But why is the

<sup>6</sup> Meredith G. Kline, “By My Spirit,” *Kerux* 9:1 (May 1994): 3-15. <http://www.kerux.com/doc/0901A1.asp>

<sup>7</sup> Meredith G. Kline, “The Rider of the Red Horse,” *Kerux* 5:3 (Dec 1990): 9-28.

<sup>8</sup> Meredith G. Kline and Ted Hildebrandt, Prologue, Lecture 30, 2012 (uploaded), 12. [http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/digitalcourses/kline\\_kingdomprologue/kline\\_kingdom\\_prologue\\_text/kline\\_kingdomprologue\\_lecture30.pdf](http://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/digitalcourses/kline_kingdomprologue/kline_kingdom_prologue_text/kline_kingdomprologue_lecture30.pdf)

Spirit here? This is **the third thing** I want to point out. This is a very important question and it is answered by Jesus in John and by Moses in the Law.

Moses says, “**two or three witnesses**” confirm a thing (**Deut 17:6**). God is making an oath, and so he establishes his oath with two or three persons. The Holy Spirit is here as covenant witness. This is his job. “**When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me**” (**John 15:26**). “**The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God**” (**Rom 8:16**). “**The Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord’**” (**Heb 10:15-16**).

The Spirit’s presence is for something else as well. Notice how smoke is spoken about in the Bible. “**Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke (*ashan*) because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently**” (**Ex 19:18**). “**The LORD will not be willing to forgive him, but rather the anger of the LORD and his jealousy will smoke (*ashan*) against that man, and the curses written in this book will settle upon him, and the LORD will blot out his name from under heaven**” (**Deut 29:20**). “**You will make them as a blazing oven (*tannur*) when you appear. The LORD will swallow them up in his wrath, and fire will consume them**” (**Ps 21:9**). “**For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch**” (**Mal 4:1**). This all fits with the war context. **The Spirit will judge those who do not keep the covenant.**

But this leads me to my last (fourth) point this morning, and it is a wonder to behold. In the covenant in Genesis 15, there is only one person speaking, and Abram is not required to do anything. This is a classic Royal Land Grant of the Ancient Near East. And the King swearing the oath is God. The picture is stunning. There are three simultaneous images going on.

First, by walking through the clean animals that symbolize Israel, he is telling Abram, **I will walk in your midst** and protect you (**Lev 26:12; Deut 23:15**).<sup>9</sup> Second, by walking through ten pieces that correspond to the ten nations, he is swearing **to fight for Abram** and his descendants. There were actually military rituals in the ANE that did this exact thing.<sup>10</sup> Third, and most strikingly, by walking through the severed pieces, The LORD is effectively

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<sup>9</sup> See Wenham, 333.

<sup>10</sup> John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 86.

saying, “If I do not keep my word, may the same thing happen to me that has happened to these animals.”<sup>11</sup> There were ANE treaties that did this too. Thus, the Holy Spirit is here to make sure that the Word keeps his promise. What an amazing condescension of grace. And remember, it is grace that belongs not only to Abram, but to all who are descended from Abram, all who have the faith of Abram.

Remember all of those questions? Walking with God necessitates questions. Thankfully, the Patriarchs asked many questions for us, and when we believe the answers they received, when we see how those answers came in the form of gracious covenants, oaths that cannot be broken, self-imprecatory maledictions if God should ever break his word, then we are able to stand on a faith that is full of evidence, and solid as a rock. But if you do not, then know that the eyes of the LORD are everywhere. They range throughout the whole earth (**Zech 4:10**; **2 Chron 16:9**). They are the eyes of the Holy Spirit. All who will not believe this message of grace will only have judgment awaiting them at the end. For God has sworn it. Therefore, enter into his grace by faith in God’s Son today. Know that the Spirit of God testifies to your spirit that you are sons of God. And be of good cheer, for God has left you with his Spirit who is with you always, who seals you to the day of redemption, who convicts you of your sin and leads you back to repentance and to Christ, so that you will be with God forever.

“For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest (**Heb 12:18**) so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I tremble with fear’ (**Heb 12:21**). But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant.” (**Heb 12:22-24**).

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<sup>11</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 430; John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 423.



