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Patrick Russell

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A Narrative Analysis of Genesis 15

by Patrick Russell

A narrative approach to Genesis 15 will present some basic elements of historical critical method as a way to frame an understanding of the text, but the main purpose is to analyze the pericope through a literary lens. To read Genesis 15 in this way is to see it first as story and as such to appreciate and learn from it as something constructed for an audience. True, there are still points of theology to be gleaned from the text using this approach, but the
outcome will likely be different from that of a purely historical analysis. Genesis 15 as narrative raises questions of actants, plot, movement, pacing, etc. All of these things are present within the passage, but can be easily overlooked from an historical point of view. This tends to ignore the structure of the text which may in turn miss important points the author intended for the audience or even for the modern reader. The attempt must be made to see Genesis 15 in this different light as one again becomes the reader/receiver of the text and not merely its dissector.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
The story of Abraham spans Genesis 11:30-25:18 which puts Genesis 15 relatively early within the story as a whole. Up until chapter 15 Abram has left Ur of the Chaldeans at God’s bidding, received a promise from God, and has headed toward Canaan. Chapter 15 presents the reader with Abram in the land, but without the promise fulfilled.

While it is impossible to know when Abram lived, most place the events of his life within the second millennium between 2000-1300 BC. If that is the case, then Abram is migrating at a time when other groups are doing the same. The archeological evidence indicates that Abram would have gone in the opposite direction from most other Semitic groups. Add to that the odd choice of leaving a city and becoming a nomad and Abram’s call becomes even more bizarre.

At least four details of the Abrahamic Cycle, two of which are in Genesis 15, seem to indicate practices that were present within the second millennium BC in Mesopotamia. The Hurrian people group attests a practice of a husband adopting his wife as a sister as a way of elevating the status of a marriage. This idea may be behind the similar actions of Abraham presenting Sarah as his sister in Genesis 12.

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3. Gordon, “Preaching from the Patriarchs,” 19. See also Genesis 20 and 26 for similar events involving Sarah and Rebekah respectively.
The story of Genesis 16 regarding Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham as a concubine is also known to have been a Mesopotamian practice in the second millennium. This is drawn out further after the birth of Isaac and the dismissal of Hagar as it puts the son of Abraham’s wife Sarah ahead of Ishmael as the son of Abraham’s concubine.⁴

As for practices within Genesis 15 which fit with the second millennium there are two. The first of these is the reported pending adoption of Eliezer as the heir of Abraham as stated in verse 2. Though God refutes this as a viable option, the fact that the story reports this as Abram’s solution speaks to something which fits the second millennium where Hurrian custom allowed childless couples the ability to adopt an heir.⁵

The other custom which places the pericope of Genesis 15 within a second millennium context is the splitting of the animals in verse 10. This covenant between the pieces is not clearly anticipated in the verses which precede it, but the action is not without explanation. Jeremiah 34:18-20⁶ shares a similar image of a covenant between animal parts. So, to say that a covenant image is present in Genesis 15:10, even though it comes upon the reader suddenly, is not out of the question. The fact that the Hebrew word בֵּית הָרֵעָה indicates an idea of cutting a covenant may also preserve this idea. The more dramatic examples of 1 Samuel 11:7⁷ and Judges 19:29-30⁸ may also be a harsh reminder of Israel’s covenant status.⁹

These four details of the Abraham story: wife as sister, adopted heir, children through concubinage, and a covenant through the pieces all

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⁴ Gordon, “Preaching from the Patriarchs,” 19. See also Genesis 30:4, 9 regarding Bilhah and Zilpah respectively.
⁵ Gordon, “Preaching from the Patriarchs,” 19.
⁶ “And those who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make like the calf when they cut it in two and passed between its parts.” (v.18).
⁷ “He took a yoke of oxen, and cut them in pieces and sent them throughout all the territory of Israel by messengers, saying, ‘Whoever does not come out after Saul and Samuel, so shall it be done to his oxen!’ Then the dread of the Lord fell upon the people, and they came out as one.”
⁸ “When he had entered his house, he took a knife, and grasping his concubine he cut her into twelve pieces, limb by limb, and sent her throughout all the territory of Israel. Then he commanded the men whom he sent, saying, ‘Thus shall you say to all the Israelites, “Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day? Consider it, take counsel, and speak out.”’”
⁹ Gordon, “Preaching from the Patriarchs,” 23.
seem to be strong indications for a second millennium setting for this part of Genesis. So, with a potential historical setting in place one can now begin to explore Genesis 15 from a literary perspective as a self-contained pericope (micro-narrative) which is part of the larger macro-narrative of the Abrahamic Cycle (Genesis 11:30-25:18).

NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

The cast of characters in this pericope is relatively short. In the course of 21 verses there are, at most, four characters, and two of those are merely walk-ons. Walk-ons in this text consist of Eliezer, who is mentioned in passing, and the descendants of Abram, who are not yet realized and therefore are not present. The only real actants in this story consist of God and Abram, God initiates the exchange, but both are active participants. God does most of the action (despatcher),10 true, but without the responses of Abram (receiver) there would be no real development or movement to the chapter.

Genesis 15 as a whole is not straightforward in its breakdown. In fact, determining the movements of the text seems to be the subject of some debate. If one sees in this chapter two narratives (vv. 1-6, 7-21) then there is a two-fold division of divine promise in vv. 1, 7; of Abram’s questioning in vv. 2-3, 8; and of God’s response in vv. 4-5, 9-21. However, the chapter can also be parsed in relation to Abram’s vision (vv.1-11) and his sleep (vv.12-21).11

To separate the chapter according to the quinary structure12 puts the text in a bit of a loop: initial situation vv.1, 7; complication vv. 2-3, 8; transforming action vv. 4-5, 9-17; denouement vv. 6, 18; and final situation vv. 19-21. It is possible to see 15:6 as the tie that binds these two sections together, but there is no clear final situation until vv. 19-21 which does seem to complicate a nice orderly structure to the text.

10 “The Despatcher mobilizes the Subject for the quest of the Object, which he must give to the Receiver; to do this the Despatcher and the Subject are linked.” Marguerat and Bourquin, 62.
12 “A structural model splitting up the plot of the narrative into five successive moments: initial situation, complication, transforming action, denouement, final situation.” Marguerat and Bourquin, 177.
It seems truer to the text to say there are certain scenes within the passage. For instance, vv.1-4 set up the context of a vision which may take place inside Abram’s tent, although that detail is not given. This leads directly into vv. 5-11 where Abram is brought outside and told to count the stars if he can. The next scene/movement comes in vv. 12-16 when Abram falls into a deep sleep. The final scene, vv. 17-21, comes with the darkness and the passing of the torch/fire pot through the pieces. Either by movement of place or time this division gives a sense of well-defined and powerful progression to the story.

Genesis 15:1 sets up a new pericope within the story of Abram by using the term “After these things.” The structure of Genesis would seem to indicate that this phrase refers to the events of chapter 14, but some have argued that this chapter is a later insertion and that one should really understand this as relating to the end of chapter 13 and the setting up of an altar by Abram.13 If that is the case then that may help account for the covenant between the pieces that comes later in v.10, but with chapter 14 now between these chapters, “after these things” remains ambiguous if it does not relate to the rescuing of Lot.

If this phrase does link chapter 13 with chapter 15 then the rereadings/retellings of Genesis 15 found in Jubilees 1414 and Josephus’ Antiquities15 would be more in line with the text of chapter 15 since they both make mention of Abraham presenting a sacrifice. Regardless, both ancient retellings seek to alleviate the ambiguity that is present in Genesis 15, but for the purposes of narrative analysis such ambiguity is not so easily dismissed and must be examined.16

Points of focalization change depending on the amount of ambiguity in the text. With the ancient retellings of Jubilees and Josephus there is much more detail given which makes it possible for the reader to

14 Jubilees 14:11 “And he built there an altar, and sacrificed all these; and he poured their blood upon the altar, and divided them in the midst, and laid them over against each other; but the birds divided he not.”
15 “When he heard that, he offered a sacrifice to God, as he commanded him.” (Antiquities 1.10.3).
externalize the event. Genesis 15, however, lacks the precise details of altar and sacrifice which prevents any attempt at a clear external focalization. An external view, however, is the only option presented as there are no caveats of internal motive/emotion nor does the text go beyond itself, apart from 15:6, to provide the reader with special knowledge.

Having clearly delineated Genesis 15 from the previous chapter the next detail the narrator provides the reader with is that this is a vision. “The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.” sets up the reader to expect something prophetic. Using that formula, assuming the reader is familiar with the prophets, serves as a signpost of expectation. The fact that it is immediately followed by “fear not” re-enforces the idea that this text is structurally prophetic. These two phrases together give a sense of God announcing assurance to Abram which is made even more striking by the fact that the phrase, “The word of the Lord came to” is only found here in the Pentateuch.

Structurally, it is worth noting the presence of a secondary narrator in this text. There is the primary narrator who lays out the story for the reader, and who provides the gloss of 15:6 which serves to link 15:1-5 with 15:7-21, but God also serves as a narrator to Abram. Genesis 15:4, 13-16 is not only God telling Abram what is to come for him and his descendants, but it also serves as a narrative device for the reader for what develops toward the end of Genesis and sets up for what results in the rest of the Pentateuch. Thus, God as secondary narrator sets in motion a sense of anticipation regarding the continuation of the story. While there is not a great deal of detail given, the reader is let in on the story that is to come.

As one moves further into the pericope (vv. 2-3), Abram speaks for the first time. Prior to this God’s interaction with Abram has been presented as monologue, but now Abram responds to God regarding the unfulfilled

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17 God refers to Abraham as a prophet in Genesis 20:7, “Now then, return the man’s wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all that are yours.” (Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.)

promise from Genesis 12:1-3. There seems to be a perceptible shift in the relational dynamic between God and Abram in this movement.

In these verses Abram presents his complaint before God, that Eliezer will be his heir. The fact that this is where Abram starts reminds the reader of the earlier promise in 12:1-3. With that connection one looks for a resolution to the problem. The reader does not have to wait long as God’s refutation of this is immediate. God makes clear that one who is of Abram’s seed will be his heir and not Eliezer his servant, but in saying this the story has moved from a presumed context of resolution to a framework of revelation.

God does not simply resolve Abram’s complaint (vv.2-3), nor will God resolve the similar complaint in v.8; rather, God’s response brings about a revelation for Abram. First in the promise of an heir and then in the promise of the land. Both were previously promised in Genesis 12, and it is because of that call and previous acceptance that Abram brings his complaint before God. It is here, in chapter 15, that Abram is reminded and reaffirmed in this fact of faith. God has not forgotten and in asking Abram to count the stars God shows him; as the One who created heaven and earth, God’s promises are sure and steadfast.

The fact that Genesis 15 contains both promises (heir and land) points to the fact that these cannot be separated. They may seem distinct, and to some extent they are, but the reason Abram left his homeland was because God called him and promised an inheritance, and that inheritance is one of land which requires an heir if it is to live beyond the lifetime of Abram.

It should be noted, since Genesis 15 is connected to Genesis 12, there is also a connection going forward to Genesis 17. Some might argue that 15 and 17 are different accounts of the same event, but that is not necessarily true. The presence of Genesis 16, and the birth of Ishmael, could just as easily have been cause enough for God to clarify the covenant between the pieces from Genesis 15.

19 Fretheim, The New Interpreters’ Bible, 444.
20 The complaints of Abram in this chapter also set up for the later challenge of Abraham in Genesis 18. Without Genesis 15 chapter 18 would be an even more surprising exchange.
The two additions of specification that are found in Genesis 17, in addition to the name changes for Abram and Sarai, stipulate that the son to be born to Abraham will be born of Sarah and the daily physical reminder of the covenant, for Abraham’s descendants, is that of circumcision. It is only in chapter 17 that there is something external to Israel’s covenant. Likewise, it is only with the birth of Isaac that the covenant of the flesh is begun at the proper time, on the eighth day, which is not something Abraham nor Ishmael can claim. Isaac, then, is the son of the promise because he has adhered to God’s command perfectly.

It should also be pointed out that there is a double layer of syncrisis at work in Genesis 15. The obvious link between Genesis 12, 15, and 17 serves as one layer that binds Abraham to a covenant with God. Similarly, Isaac and Jacob are also affirmed in the covenant, thus binding together all three of the patriarchs in this way. The second layer, however, is that of barrenness. Just as Sarah was barren until the birth of Isaac so too Rebekah and Rachel were barren. There is a level of concern regarding the continuation of the covenant, especially regarding Sarah and Rebekah, but without children of her own Rachel shares equally in that same fear.

Thus, the reader comes to 15:6, the narrative gloss that binds the sections of this chapter together. “And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” After looking again at creation Abram’s faith in God’s promise is fortified. As Brueggemann puts it, “The new pilgrimage of Abraham is not grounded in the old flesh of Sarah nor the tired bones of Abraham, but in the disclosing word of God.” All Abram did was look at the stars, and yet acceptance and righteousness are the result. Something in that action has created a shift in perspective for Abram.

That shift from protest to praise makes 15:7-21 a bit curious to say the least as the reader goes from an affirmation of an heir to a discussion of

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23 Genesis 26:24-25 and Genesis 35:11-12 respectively. Genesis 26 makes the bond even more explicit with the phrase, “fear not”.
24 See Genesis 11:30, 25:21, and 29:31 respectively.
25 Brueggemann, Interpretation: Genesis, 145.
the land. Though, unlike the previous complaint, it is God who brings up the subject of the land first, not Abram. In doing so the reader encounters, in Genesis 15:7, what could be a shared formula with the Exodus story when God says, “I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.” which is very similar to “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to give you the land of Canaan, to be your God.” Such similarity is hard to ignore as a stylistic link between the two events even before God informs Abram of the pending sojourn in a foreign land.

Once God brings up the issue of the land, then Abram presents another complaint in v. 8. The difference between v.8 and vv.2-3 is one of perspective. Where vv.2-3 voice doubt in the promise, v.8 is closer to the words of Mary, “how can this be?” This is not framed as a challenge, but as an inquiry. Much like the practice of inquiring before the Lord, Abram seeks to understand.

The subject of land leads directly into Abram being commanded to bring animals before God. In bringing the heifer, goat, ram, turtledove, and young pigeon Abram, narratively, has brought one of every sacrificial animal from the Levitical code. By cutting up the larger animals one sees a possible priestly image of Abram. Abram had already been given the signpost of a king in Genesis 14 and that of a prophet in 15:1, so to see him as priest in 15:9-10 is not surprising. These three markers incapsulate the whole of Israel’s reality and it makes sense that they should all be present in Abraham. This priestly aspect may be buttressed by 15:6 and the word “reckoned/counted” as it tends to have a cultic connotation relating to that which is properly offered/acceptable to the Lord.

The priestly allusions are equally overlayed in 15:9-11 with those of treaty making/covenant cutting. Though the reader is not told that a covenant

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26 This formula is first mentioned in Exodus 20:2, but the verse quoted above is Leviticus 25:38 as it appears to be the closest parallel to the wording of Genesis 15:7.

27 Luke 1:34.

28 Like the father in Mark 9:24, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief.” Abram’s faith stands in contrast to what seems impossible.


is the intended purpose for the animals, the text indicates that Abram understands this without having to be told. Having previously accepted God’s words of promise, Abram responds with action in the presenting of the animals. It is true that Abram does not pass through the pieces, but it would be equally unfair to say that Abram has no active part in the chapter.

The chasing away of the carrion birds in v.11 is difficult to understand. Many different theories have been proposed, even allegorical ones, but none seem all that satisfactory. It could simply be a detail that was handed down, but it might also speak to the priestly aspects of this event. By chasing away the carrion birds the animals remain an acceptable sacrifice because they are not defiled by unclean birds.

15:12 presents a couple of interesting details to the reader. The first of these is regarding the timing within the chapter. Abram was previously told to count the stars (v.5) and yet v. 12 speaks of sunset and darkness after the fact. It is possible, given the chapter begins with a vision, that the stars were seen in that state which would allow for a more logical chronological sequence, but that is not clear within the text itself. The more likely explanation, for the time disjunction is that this is symbolic. If time in this pericope is symbolic, then it can easily be night before it is sunset. In some way this may speak to Abram moving from misunderstanding/ignorance to a state of belief/acceptance. Though all is not clear, sunset reveals more than night which would indicate that Abram, as well as the reader, now sees more clearly.

The second detail of 15:12 that stands out is the deep sleep of Abram. This is a perplexing detail which seems to indicate another vision as God appears to Abram in a dream. Divine dream visions are not that strange, especially since there are many recorded in the Old Testament, but what is unique is Abram’s deep sleep. The Hebrew word used here is הָמֵּדְרַּת and is found in only two places in the Pentateuch: Genesis 15:12 and Genesis 2:21. Such a literary device is shocking, but it forms a clear link between Adam and Abram for a Hebrew audience. By this word choice one might even ponder a sense of starting over or a new beginning intended with Abram and his descendants.31

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31 Gordon, “Preaching from the Patriarchs, 23.
The words of God in 15:13-16 indicate a time yet to come, but there is almost no detail regarding the events to come. Abram’s descendants will sojourn in a foreign land before returning to inherit the land of Canaan once the sins of the Amorites are complete, but where that sojourn is remains absent; in fact, no geopolitical details are given.

Genesis 15:17 returns the reader to a state of darkness as it is again night. Unlike the previous time changes being seen as symbolic of Abram’s faith, this shift in time appears to have a different function/signal for the reader: that of impending theophany. This darkness, called “terrifying darkness” in v.12, descends upon Abram much like the cloud upon Mt. Sinai. To make a literary connection between Abram, here, and Moses later is not difficult. Darkness, smoke, torch, and fiery appearance are present in both cases and it is clear that Mt. Sinai is a theophanic event. Thus, it would stand to reason that the covenant between the pieces is also to be seen in this same context of theophany.32

If one understands vv.17ff to be that of a theophany, then God passing between the pieces takes on renewed significance. In doing so God stakes God’s life on the fulfillment of this promise. The land will be inherited by Abram’s descendants or God’s life is forfeit. This is made explicit in v. 18 when the narrator tells the reader “On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram.” There is no ambiguity in that statement, and it serves to further cement 15:1-6 with the rest of the text. Promise and covenant are one, and God, by God’s own choosing, has entered into a lasting relationship with Abram and his seed forever.

Genesis 15:18-21 then lays out the boundaries of the land for Abram. In doing this there is another link for the reader between Abraham and Moses/Exodus, but more than that there is also a possible tie to the time of the United Kingdom of Israel. The boundaries given in Genesis 15 most closely parallel the boarders of Israel in the time of David and Solomon and likely would have been known to the reader/hearer of the Hebrew text.

CONCLUSION

The dynamic movements of this pericope are numerous. Not only are there changes in time (night, sunset, night), but there are also changes in posture/location (vision, dream, inside, outside, present, future). On top of that there are several allusions to other events in the Pentateuch, and beyond: Adam, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David, Solomon, etc. can all be hinted at within this text as well as the central ideas of Israelite identity of prophet, priest, and—thanks to the end of Genesis 14—king. So much is here for the viewing of the reader that it could very easily be taken as an encapsulated telling of the story of Israel.

Even though this chapter comes early in the Abrahamic Cycle, it is critically important for the narrative of Genesis, as well as the Pentateuch and beyond, for understanding the events that follow. So much deeply depends upon this cornerstone of Genesis 15 for an understanding of the Old Testament. Though it may be lacking in some details, this is a very well-constructed narrative intended to communicate a sense of identity with a level of depth that was unexpected, and at times surprising to see.

Genesis 15 gives a dialogue, but in doing so presents the reader with his/her own question: can I, like Abram, trust God, and can God be trusted?33 Though the answer was a resounding yes for Abram, the reader is left to explore the rest of Scripture before deciding that question on a personal basis. Much like Jesus’ calling of the disciples, this is not an easy question that someone else may answer for another person. This is a question to be wrestled with, and sometimes wrestled with repeatedly in life because it is in the wrestling and struggle that faith and doubt meet, and God is made manifest.

Much like the crucifixion, God passing between the pieces communicates a sense of urgency and profoundly deep love for humanity that, in the case of Genesis 15 seems to fill Abram with a sense of awe. The covenant between the pieces and the cross present a picture of God as One who is willing to risk everything for God’s creation. God puts everything on the

33 Brueggemann, Interpretation: Genesis, 150.
line in order that God might be in relationship/covenant with people.\textsuperscript{34} The response of Abram in 15:6, which indicates a proper response, is the only acceptable response to the cross of Christ for the life of the world, though without Genesis 15, such a response seems less obvious.

Though the historical placement of the text within a context of the second millennium BC is helpful for understanding some of the practices reported in the Abrahamic Cycle, the narrative beauty and depth of Genesis 15 is not to be denied. Such an understanding might not have been possible outside of a narrative analysis, but with it, these points become something wonderful which in turn enriches an engagement with the text. The two approaches together make for a journey that is well worth it.

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