

THE FIRST BOOK OF MOSES CALLED GENESIS.

GENESIS, CHAPTER 15.

VERSES TAKEN FROM “THE TANAKH. THE JEWISH BIBLE.” TRADITIONAL HEBREW TEXT.

15:1...Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.

God did not speak to Abram directly but, through a vision or, in other instances, a dream. In the Torah, there are several levels of divine revelation. Only Moses communicated with God “face to face.” God has no physical form. (Deuteronomy 4:12)

THE ONLY ANSWER TO FEAR.

15:1 (cont.)...He said, “Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you;

What is God telling Abram not to fear?

One source of fear is God. Who wouldn’t fear God when in His presence? Adam did, (Genesis 3:10) as well as others who directly encounter God—Jacob (Genesis 28:17) and Moses. (Exodus 3:6) God is aware His presence is awe-inspiring and terrifying. Therefore, He reassured Abram that not only is He not a threat, He is Abram’s protector.

Jewish Rabbi’s always point out the most frequent statement of God to man in the Hebrew Bible is “Do not fear.”

The other, often greater, source of fear is people. We fear being hurt by others.

God is, therefore, telling Abram not to fear other people. And the greatest antidote to fear is faith in God. Even an atheist would acknowledge that anyone who has faith in God (not merely believes there is a God) will have little reason to fear. Those who have faith in God are the only people who can believe that

whatever happens to them, things will ultimately turn out for the good—if not in this world, in the next world.

15:1 (cont.)... Your reward shall be very great.”

Reward for what? According to Jewish Rabbi's, it is for “Abram's refusal to have any part in the spoils of war mentioned in 14:22. The material reward, so disdainfully spurned, is to be vastly exceeded by a recompense of a different kind.”

Also likely is that God is reassuring Abram His promises will in fact materialize. For example, despite Sarai's advanced age, God's promise of a nation of descendants is still in place.

15:2...But Abram said, “Oh Lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household is Dammesek Eliezer!”

Abram's profound fear of dying childless is made clear.

15:3...Abram said further, “Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir.”

Unlike Noah, who never questioned God, Abram did. The first Hebrew spoken to by God exhibited a trait that is characteristically, almost uniquely, Jewish: he talked back to God. It is little wonder that Abram's grandson is later named “Israel,” a Hebrew word meaning “wrestle/struggle with God.” (Genesis 32:29)

15:4...The word of the Lord came to him in reply, “That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue shall be your heir.”

15:5...He took him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He added, “So shall your offspring be.”

15:6...And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit.

God's response to Abram's questioning Him apparently suffices.

The Torah credits Abram for ***trusting in*** God, not for believing that God exists. The Torah takes God's existence as a given. The Bible views atheism as simply foolish—see, for example, Psalm 92:5-6: “How great are your works, Lord, how profound your thoughts! Senseless people do not know, fools do not understand.”

In the modern world, people have generally defined “faith” as belief in God’s existence. But in the Torah’s view, this type of faith is meaningless. It is like believing in the existence of one’s neighbor: the issue is not whether the neighbor exists but, whether the neighbor can be trusted. So, too, with God. Trust in, not belief in, is the issue. (as in the expression, “I believe in you”) That is what Abraham exhibited.

This verse has often been cited by Christians as evidence the Hebrew Bible teaches that faith alone, (“he puts his trust in the Lord”) not good works, is required for salvation. The Christian emphasis on faith has led innumerable Christians to devote their lives to doing good works. Think, for example, of all the hospitals and charities Christians have established or all of the Christians who have devoted their lives to serving the poor in their own countries and in the world’s poorest countries.

However, this verse teaches God considers faithfulness meritorious, not that faith is the only thing that God considers meritorious or the only thing God requires of men. Moreover, even while acknowledging that in Christian theology faith is the source of salvation, the New Testament repeatedly declares the necessity of good works in addition to it, and as a manifestation of, faith.

For example, James declares: “What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has not works, is dead.” (James 2:14-17)

Elsewhere the New Testament states:

“[God] will render to every man according to his deeds. He will give eternal life to those who keep on doing good.....” (Romans 2:6-7)

“I will give unto you every one of you according to your works.” (Revelation 2:23)

See also 2 Corinthians 5:10, Matthew 5:16, 12:36-37, John 14:12, and Revelation 20:13, 22:12.

In regards to the Hebrew Bible, God demands good works more than anything else. The prophet Micah says, “He [God] has told you, O man, what is good and what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8)

This is an affirmation of both faith and works. While faith without works is dead, works without faith also ultimately die. Virtually every mass genocide in the twentieth century was committed by secular, anti-religious regimes. This does not mean there are no good atheists or bad religious people. There are good people who do not believe in God and bad people who do. But individuals and societies that believe in the morally demanding God of the Bible—at the very least, the Ten Commandments—will generally behave better and have clearer moral judgments. Perhaps the most morally confused institution in the West at this time is also the least religious one—the university.

The most important thing to exhibit trust in God is to live by God’s will. And that means, first and foremost, acting morally toward fellow human beings.

15:7...Then He said to him, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession.”

This is almost precisely the same language with which God begins the Ten Commandments: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt....” (Exodus 20:21) It is one of the myriad hints at a unity of authorship of the Torah.

15:8...And he said, “Oh Lord God, how shall I know that I am to possess it?”

Abram’s question is an expression of curiosity, not skepticism. He is simply asking how God plans to bring about His promise.

15:9...He answered, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young bird.”

To the modern reader, God’s answer to Abram appears to be a complete non-sequitur. But in the ancient world, these kinds of signs were often part of important legal pacts. That is obviously how Abram understood it. His immediate and unquestioning obedience strongly implies he was familiar with what was about to happen.

15:10...He brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut up the bird.

15:11...Birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

15:12...As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him.

Despite the fact that God had just told him not to fear His presence, Abram experiences dread. However, he did not do so while awake but while in a “deep sleep.” The Hebrew word for “deep sleep” (*tardema*) is the same word used to describe the deep sleep of Adam when the woman was made from his side.

15:13...And He said to Abram, “Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs,

That land is, of course, Egypt.

15:13 (cont.)... and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years;

Those who look for inconsistencies in the Torah point to this number as an example. Here the Israelites time in Egypt is given as four hundred years but, Exodus records the time as 430 years. (Exodus 12:40-41) But as the British scholar Kenneth Kitchen, professor of Egyptology at the University of Liverpool wrote, “the 400 years is a round figure in prospect, while the 430 years is more precise in retrospect.”

Kitchen’s point simply makes sense. Moreover, wouldn’t any competent human author or editor have seen such an apparently glaring discrepancy and presumably made the two time periods the same? The very fact that the two numbers are left unedited argues for their compatibility and for the authenticity of the text: God was giving Abram a general idea of the time the Israelites would serve in Egypt; and after it took place, the Torah provided the precise number of years.

15:14...but I will execute judgment on the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth.

Why does God deem it necessary to tell Abram what will happen to his descendants in Egypt? Of what use is this knowledge to Abram? I can only

conclude this is told for the benefit of the Torah reader—God knows what will happen to the Israelites and, most important, plays a role in its happening. From a Torah perspective, whether God knows everything men will do is an open question. God knows everything men do—but not necessarily what they will do because human beings have free will. That is why, for example, the Torah says that after seeing how bad men turned out, “God regretted He had made man on earth.” (Genesis 6:6) If God knew how men would turn out, why would He regret how they turned out? He would have known. And why would He have made man to begin with?

I take no position on this question. I only wish to emphasize that a possible reason God told Abram his descendants would be enslaved is that, for some reason, this was God’s plan.

15:15...As for you, You shall go to your fathers

Often, in describing death, the Torah and the rest of the Hebrew Bible use the phrase “gathered to one’s kin.” Here, the Torah describes Abram’s eventual death as Abram going “to your fathers.” For reasons I will explain at length, the Torah never directly declares there is an afterlife. But throughout the Torah, an afterlife is clearly implied. Rabbis of old often note, “In whatever form, the phrase certainly originates from the belief in an afterlife in which one is reunited with one’s ancestors irrespective of where they are buried.”

ONLY ABRAHAM DIES IN PEACE

15:15 (cont.)...in peace; You shall be buried at a ripe old age.

God promises Abram he will die in peace. In the Torah, only Abraham and Isaac (Genesis 35:29) are described as dying “in peace” and at a “ripe old age.” To die in peace is a blessing few people experience. When the renowned short story writer and poet Dorothy Parker (1893-1967) expressed her disappointment to movie mogul Samuel Goldwyn that he hadn’t made a movie out of any of her stories, Goldwyn told her: “People want happy endings. All your stories have unhappy endings.” Parker responded: “Mr. Goldwyn, since the world was created, billions and billions of people have lived, and not one has had a happy ending.”

15:16...And they shall return here in the fourth generation,

According to the biblical scholar and archaeologist William F. Albright, (1891-1971) editor of the “Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, (1931-1968) the Hebrew word for “generation” (dor) originally meant “lifetime,” not “generation.” “The early Hebrews,” he explained, “dated long periods by lifetimes, not by generations.” Accordingly, this verse refers to a period of four lifetimes—about four hundred years (the patriarchs all lived more than one hundred years)—not four generations.

THE MORAL BASIS FOR THE EXPULSION OF THE CANAANITES

15:16 (cont.)...for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”

The Amorites were one of the nation’s living in Canaan in Abram’s time. God informed Abram that He would not dispossess the Amorites until these people had become so evil that they deserved exile. (see Leviticus 18:24-30) Only then, four lifespans later, would Abram’s descendants be able to return to Canaan.

Even though God assigned the Land of Israel to the People of Israel, He would permit them to enter the land only if and when its previous inhabitants had been sufficiently immoral as to warrant their expulsion. That God felt it necessary to explain the morality of the Israelite conquering of Canaan is one more illustration of the centrality of morality to the Torah.

15:17...When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces.

15:18...On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram,

This covenant, known as “brit bein habetarim,” “the Covenant of the Pieces,” (referring to the animals severed in two at God’s command in verses 9-10) is the second covenant God made with humanity. (The first was the covenant with Noah—Genesis 9:8-17) It is also the first covenant God made with the Israelites who, of course, become the Jews. Unlike later covenants, these first two covenants are unconditional on God’s part: they demand nothing of human beings.

The notion of a covenant between God and man was revolutionary because all other cultures and religions believed that the gods acted capriciously and that the world was therefore completely erratic and unpredictable. When God covenanted with Noah and Abram, He pledged to be dependable and trustworthy, thereby creating for the first time immutable spiritual and moral laws.

15:18 (cont.)...saying, “To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates:

15:19...the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,

15:20...the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,

15:21...the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”