

## Genesis 15 Question:

### **What is the promise of God to Abraham and did God fail to keep it?**

I see this discussion as perhaps **the most important for understanding of the OT with implications for the whole Bible**. So I want to be as clear as I can. Your help will enable me to communicate as well as possible.

More specifically the question as asked revolves around the following:

“The covenant with Abram was basically one-sided, as Abram was asleep. God was saying He was going to do it all, ...or His death if He doesn’t bring to pass all that He is promising to Abram.

“The Gen 15 covenant with Abram says, “to your descendants I give this land.....”.

“I see this covenant being fulfilled in the book of Joshua. The Lord handed over the nations of these same kings that were mentioned in the covenant, to Joshua’s armies.

After Joshua’s conquering of the nations:

- Joshua 21: 43-45 “So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there....Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord handed all their enemies over to them. NOT ONE of all the Lord’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled”.
- Joshua 23:14 “ .....You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed”
- Joshua 24:12-13 “.....you did not do it with your own sword and bow. So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant” (In other words, God did it all, just as he promised He would do in His covenant with Abram)

## Response:

Genesis 15 must be seen in context of the full promise of God. That context runs from Genesis 12.1 through Genesis 22

**Gen. 12** The Lord had said to Abram, “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you.

<sup>2</sup> “I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.<sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;  
and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you.”<sup>[b]</sup>

## Genesis 22

<sup>17</sup> I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, <sup>18</sup> and through your offspring<sup>[seed]</sup> all nations on earth will be blessed, <sup>[c]</sup> because you have obeyed me.”

The command of God and its requirements and blessings must be seen in the context of these bookend statements of overall direction. God intends for Abram to be blessed with many “descendants” and the land of Canaan. **But God meant those to be means to fulfill his great purpose: to bless all “nations,”** so that the blessing of doing his will, living in joyous concert and fellowship with Him would be achieved. **The land and the numberless offspring of Abraham are only instruments in God’s “project.”** It’s a common misunderstanding to think God’s objective was only or primarily to give Canaan to the “Children of Israel” and to make them a huge population.

It was **the misunderstanding that Israel itself adopted about God’s promises.** That can be seen, indeed, in the exaggerations of the extent of the fulfillment of the land given in the passages cited from the book of Joshua. Joshua 21. 43-45, 23.14 and 24.12-13. But we must not fail to note that God says to Joshua in Joshua 13.1-5:

When Joshua had grown old, the Lord said to him, “You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.

<sup>2</sup> “This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites, <sup>3</sup> from the Shihor River on the east of Egypt to the territory of Ekron on the north, all of it counted as Canaanite though held by the five Philistine rulers in Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron; the territory of the Avvites <sup>4</sup> on the south; all the land of the Canaanites, from Arah of the Sidonians as far as Aphek and the border of the Amorites; <sup>5</sup> the area of Byblos; and all Lebanon to the east, from Baal Gad below Mount Hermon to Lebo Hamath.

And in Judges 1 & 2, we see the Lord dealing with the failure of Israel (not his own failure) to drive out all the peoples of the land.

Judges 2 concludes:

<sup>20</sup> Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel and said, “Because this nation has violated the covenant I ordained for their ancestors and has not listened to me, <sup>21</sup> I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations Joshua left when he died. <sup>22</sup> I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the Lord and walk in it as their ancestors did.” <sup>23</sup> **The Lord had allowed those nations to remain;** he did not drive them out at once by giving them into the hands of Joshua. (my emphasis)

So what are we to make of the **contrasting versions of aspirational conquest in the face of the reality that Israel in fact failed?** We are to understand, it seems, that Israel wanted the blessings, but was unwilling to obey God completely. Once again, the Bible tells us the whole story, even when it is not pretty or self-serving. And **Judges concludes by showing the awful result of their failure.** Read the last few chapters and weep. So Judges concludes with what we must see as its theme: **The people did what was right in their own eyes.** And look what that produced!

Now, add to that the misunderstanding behind the triumphal expressions in Joshua. The misunderstanding that Israel began to believe was just this: God fulfilled his promises by giving Israel the Land. **The Land became their goal.**

The land was never God's promised *goal*. God's goal has always been the winning of the nations. **God's Project.** This is why we make such a repetitious effort to recite it. By the end of Judges we see already what will turn out to be the final outcome of Israel's failure. **By making the land their Goal, it became an idol** and obstacle to their achievement of God's commission to bless all the world's peoples. Their land itself illustrates this. When the Jordan runs through the Sea of Galilee it gives life and water to the whole land. But when it runs into the Dead Sea and not out again, it kills.

As the end of the OT period arrives, the "Jews" (by then, no longer Israelites) adopted this **false view that God had blessed them and them alone.** That's the misunderstanding Jesus came to dispel and to call back "Israel" to God's original commission. Official Israel refused. And they consequently killed Jesus. Jesus' teaching to re-establish God's original intention will be the focus of our New Testament teaching.

Now we **go back to the meaning of the scene in Genesis 15.** It must be seen in the light, not just of Abram's question, "Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" (v. 8) But it stands against the background of God's total call and promise ("Covenant") with Abram.

Yes, the chapter concludes as if the total promise is for the land:

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kademonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, <sup>21</sup> Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

But Abram had also been talking about his descendants just a few verses earlier before his question of God. So **we must understand the part in light of the whole of the Covenant of Genesis 12.1-3 and Genesis 22. 17-18.** (This is a figure of speech that means a part stands for the whole—*synecdoche*. Not a common word. Example, when we say "dollar" we may also mean the whole financial system.)

So Abram wants to know whether God is going to fulfill his whole promise to bless all the nations of the world by giving him the blessings of land and children. Therefore, God tells him in dramatic action that He, the Sovereign Lord, will bear the curse of the Covenant **if his strategy to rescue the whole world through blessing Abraham with land and descendants is not carried out.** His Covenant will not fail, even if Abram's children and land fail.

**So, the question is whether this is God's failure.** Does God's accepting the covenant's sanction prove that God failed? Not at all. Does Adam's sin show that God failed to produce a world that was very good? Does Jesus dying for our sin mean that God failed? Not at all. It does mean that **God takes the responsibility for rescuing his creation from its own failure.** And God never quits, whatever human failure stands in the way. [Do we serve a great God?—or what?]

Clearly Israel proved to be unwilling and unable to bring about the rescue of the world God's Project as God directed. It turned the Cornucopia of God's blessing meant for the world into a funnel of blessing on itself. Instead of being Galilee it becomes the Dead Sea.

Another way to say this might be to say that **Israel only fulfilled God's promise by being the means through which Jesus came into the world.** He came to accept the "curse" to demonstrate that God means, no matter what, ("so do to me and more also") to keep his Covenant, even if that means he accepts its sanctions.

Remember that **the Covenant remains in full force and effect** even when the sanction is applied. Now, however, the sanction of the curse has been fulfilled so those brought into the Covenant no longer have the curse of the covenant—if they come in through the one who kept the Covenant—even its curse.

This is what Jesus means when he says, I did not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5. 17). This is one meaning behind the Apostle Paul's words in Galatians 3.3 "Christ redeemed us from the **curse** of the law by becoming a **curse** for us." It's even enshrined in our Christmas Carol, "Joy to the World" "**He comes to make his blessings flow/ Far as the curse is found,** Far as the curse is found, Far as the curse is found."

Well, another long answer. But this is crucial to understand, if we are going to understand the Bible.