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Lost in Translation | *Smoke and Fire*

Genesis 15

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So, God made a covenant with Abram. What kind of covenant?

When I was a kid, I was fascinated by the concept of “blood brothers”. I don’t remember when I became aware of that concept, but the thought was that a good friend and I would make a cut on our palms and then clasp hands, mingling our blood together, bonding us together in an unbreakable pact. I never did it though. The cutting of the palm was a bit much. Not a fan of blood. It wasn’t until later that I realized there were other ways to enter into a “blood brother” relationship.

The main and most recognizable is called a covenant. An agreement that is usually legally binding between two different individuals or their wards. Usually, an agreement to be family. Think of adoption or marriage. Not family through blood, but family through a mutual agreement. I am adopted. While I have a family out there through blood ties, when I think of family I immediately think of my adoptive family. The covenant exists. It lives. It’s a bond.

There are other kinds of covenants as well. One we call a “parity treaty”, an agreement between equals. And in Abram’s time this would mean smaller but equal nations or kingdoms would band together to fight off larger powers if needed. It’s a one for all and all for one covenant. Think of NATO in our time.

However, in Abram’s time there was a very different and incredibly important covenant called the suzerain/vassal covenant. This was a covenant made between two nations where one was much more powerful than the other. The vassal – the weaker nation would pay tribute to the suzerain – the much more powerful nation in order to buy protection against other invading nations. Some call it the “bodyguard” treaty. And it was up to the weaker nation to maintain its payments and also it

was up the weaker nation to remind the more powerful nation of the covenant. And that initial covenant and the subsequent reminders were solidified through ritual. A very weird and bloody ritual, but highly appropriate and well known for the times.

And the ritual was not a bloody handshake, or a legal adoption or a legal marriage. The weaker nation’s king would gather several different kinds of animals – cut them in half, place them on opposite sides of each other creating a pathway – a bloody pathway, and then the weaker nation’s king would walk – the blood path speaking their oath of loyalty to the more powerful nation shouting loudly for everyone to hear, that if the weaker nation did not pay for protection then what happened to the animals would happen to them. They would be cut down and the more powerful nation – the suzerain – would walk through the vassal’s blood. Gross for us in our time... but highly important and effective in Abram’s time. And then as part of the ritual they would roast the dead animals and have a celebration feast. Backyard BBQ anyone?

So why spend all this time on covenants?

God made a covenant with Abram. What kind of covenant? Was it a bloody handshake, an adoption or a marriage? If you paid attention to the scripture reading you already know the answer. God made a suzerain/vassal covenant with Abram. And the power dynamic is obvious. God the more powerful suzerain and Abram the weaker the vassal.

God starts by reminding Abram how powerful God is and what God is capable of doing. Count the stars, God says to Abram. And God tells Abram, prepare the blood path. And Abram knew what to do. So, the blood path is prepared but for some reason Abraham pauses. He waits. He waits so long that the day is coming to an end. Why does Abraham hesitate?

¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him. (Gen 15:12 NRS)

Abram is terrified. He is terrified because he knows that he will not be able to pay the debt. He will not be able to pay the debt for this bodyguard. He knows he will fail. He will not be able to keep his end of the suzerain/vassal agreement. He is looking at his future body being cut in half and God the suzerain walking through his vassal blood. Terrifying.

But God does the unthinkable. God does what no suzerain would ever do. He speaks to Abram...

¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴ but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. (Gen 15:13-15 NRS)

God flips the whole suzerain/vassal covenant on its head. God not only speaks the oath of a vassal, but God walks the blood path – does what the vassal should do. God does for Abram what Abram cannot do for himself.

¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. (Gen 15:17 NRS)

The most powerful, the almighty God of the universe, represented here as a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch lowers Godself to the vassal's level and walks the blood path, essentially saying to Abram if I the God of all creation fail you – you will walk in my blood. This is unbelievably radical. It makes no sense unless you trust the story and realize that God is a God of love and will do anything to keep God's covenant with God's people. Over a thousand years later the Apostle Paul puts it this way.

⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied

himself, taking the form of a slave (a vassal), being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. (Phi 2:4-8 NRS)

From the very beginning of the story – of calling God's people through the family of Abram and Sarai – God knowing the terror that grips our hearts, knowing that we can never pay the debt – God pays it for us. On the cross God walks the blood path. Paul in Colossians put it this way.

¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴ having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. (Col 2:13-14 TNIV)

So, covenant made, and covenant kept. All done. Nothing to worry about. But God also knows the reality of human life. Even though God makes the covenant and fulfills the covenant, there will be hardship in the midst of it. God tells Abram that his descendants will spend 400 years as slaves. Persecuted. But God calls Abram and his descendants to trust the story, even when they are in the deepest darkest moments of slavery. Trust the story. Jesus puts it this way in the Gospel of John.

¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world-- therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'Servants are not greater than their master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ Whoever hates me hates my Father also. (Joh 15:19-23 NRS)

Trusting the story is hard. Especially, when like Abram, your heart is gripped with terror. Trusting

the story is hard. Especially when you are a Jesus follower, and you are persecuted because of it. But we are called to trust the story, even though a lot has been lost in translation, trust the story because God is the great covenant maker and keeper and that covenant exists, it lives, and it is right here, right now and is for you.

The prophet Isaiah puts it this way:

*¹⁰ do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand.
(Isa 41:10 NRS)*