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**“A Crux and a Taunt: Night-Time Then Sunset in Genesis 15.”**

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# The World of Genesis

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## A CRUX AND A TAUNT: NIGHT-TIME THEN SUNSET IN GENESIS 15

Scott B. Noegel

In Genesis 15 we are faced with a peculiar problem. Following Abraham's vision in which Yahweh calms his fears and promises him an heir, Yahweh offers this challenge: 'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them'. He then adds, 'So shall your offspring be' (15.5). In v. 12, however, the narrator informs us that the sun had not yet set.<sup>1</sup> The crux is one of sequence: either it is night or it is day. Oddly, few have commented on the blatant 'dischronologized' order.<sup>2</sup>

Of those who have noticed, the contradiction has been met primarily from two camps. On the one hand, for those of the school of higher criticism, the dischronologization is the result of mixed sources. In his commentary to Genesis, E.A. Speiser explained the problem that 'it is nighttime in v. 5 but still daylight in 12', as illustrative of the 'marked departures from the usual manner of J', for which he cautiously suggested the hand of E.<sup>3</sup> In this he seems to have adopted the view of John Skinner.<sup>4</sup> In the other camp are those who justify the contradiction on the basis that Aristotelian logic is not applicable to the ancient Near

1. For a discussion on the chronological problem, see G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 71.

2. I have adopted this term from W.J. Martin, "'Dischronologized" Narrative in the Old Testament', in *Congress Volume* (VTSup, 17; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), pp. 179-86; for an example of a lack of treatment of the problem, see C. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary* (trans. J.J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1981), p. 226. More recently it has been ignored by D.A. Glatt, *Chronological Displacement in Biblical and Related Literatures* (SBLDS, 139; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993). See my review of the latter in *Journal for the Association of Jewish Studies* 21 (1996), pp. 367-69.

3. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB, 1; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), p. 114.

4. J. Skinner, *Genesis* (ICC; New York: Scribner's, 1910), p. 281, ascribes v. 5 to J and v. 12 to both J and E.

Eastern mindset, that is, that the ancients were not bothered by such anachronisms.<sup>5</sup>

While some support for this view may be garnered from the Talmud—מאחר בחורה אין מוקדם ומאחר בחורה—'there is no early or late in the Torah'<sup>6</sup>—it is clear that v. 12 bothered the sages, though typically they offered ingenious solutions. Rashi was inclined to take v. 12 metaphorically as 'alluding to the afflictions and darkness of the diaspora'.<sup>7</sup> Rambam, elaborating on Rashi, also took it as a prophetic metaphor for the diaspora. In an attempt to harmonize the passages, Ibn Ezra opined that the verse 'tells us that he (Abram) took for himself all these things (the birds) on the day after the (day) in which he awoke from the prophetic vision'.<sup>8</sup> V. Hamilton finds support for Ibn Ezra's view in that 'v. 11 has mentioned birds of prey, who hunt their victims during the day, thus implying that Abram's vision has moved into its second day'.<sup>9</sup> Abrabanel,<sup>10</sup> after explaining the chapter as depicting Abram's departure from astrology, sighed:

Oh that I knew whether it were day or night. For if it were day, then the stars could not have been visible, and if it were night, there is the difficult [verse] 'And the sun set' (v. 26).<sup>11</sup>

To Abravanel this passage was a hopeless paradox. Nevertheless, we may gain clearer insight into the crux by examining other biblical passages and their contexts which employ what will be termed the '*im tûkal*' 'if you are able' construction.<sup>12</sup>

5. N. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1984), does not address the issue. For a similar treatment, see also Martin, "'Dischronologized" Narrative', pp. 179-86.

6. b. *Pes.* 6b.

7. רמז לצרות וחשך של לילות.

8. והיה השמש לבא. זה לנו לאור כי יקח לו אח כל אלה ביום אחר שהקיץ ממחיה הנבואה.

9. V.P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 434. For a similar opinion, see J.C.L. Gibson, *Genesis* (2 vols.; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), I, p. 53.

10. I would like to thank Bernard Grossfeld of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, for pointing out this comment to me.

11. מי יתן שידעתי אם היה ביום או בלילה כי א' א שיהיה ביום כמ' ש' וספר הכוכבים. כי אינם נראים ביום ואם היה בלילה יקשה אברו ויהי השמש לבא.

12. Syntactically, the construction is an indirect question, though its usage lacks

The phrase *'im tûkal* 'if you are able' is rather rare in the Bible, occurring elsewhere only four (or five) times: Gen. 13.16; 1 Sam. 17.8-9; 2 Kgs 18.23-24 (= Isa. 36.8); and Job 33.5. A brief comparison of these passages yields a striking similarity in contexts and usage, which bears upon our understanding of the crux in Gen. 15.5.

Gen. 13.16 (God to Abram):

I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one is able (*'im-yûkal 'îš*) to count the dust of the earth, then your offspring too can be counted.

1 Sam. 17.8-9 (Goliath to Israel):

Choose one of your men and let him come down against me. If he is able (*'im-yûkal*) to combat me and kill me, we will become your slaves; but if I am able (*'im 'nî 'ûkal*) to combat him and kill him, you shall be our slaves and serve us.

2 Kgs 18.23-24 (= Isa. 36.8) (Rabshakeh to the Jerusalemite inhabitants):

Come now, make this wager with my master, the king of Assyria: I'll give you two thousand horses if you are able (*'im-tûkal*) to produce riders to mount them. So how could you refuse anything even to the deputy of one of my master's lesser servants, relying on Egypt for chariots and horsemen?

Job 33.5 (Elihu to Job):

If you are able (*'im-tûkal*), answer me, prepare for the contest, take your stand.

Two passages should be added to our comparison, Num. 22.38 and 2 Chron. 32.13, though they employ the construction interrogative *he plus verb ykl* instead of *'im tûkal*.

Num. 22.38 (Balaam to Balak):

And now that I have come to you, am I able (*h'yākôl 'ûkal*) to speak freely? I can utter only the word that God puts in my mouth.

2 Chron. 32.13 (Sennacherib to Hezekiah):

Were the gods of the nations of the lands able (*h'yākôl yāk'lû*) to save their lands from me?

appreciable study. See, e.g., its omission in B.K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

A comparison of the passages produces three points of commonality. First, in each of the passages, the implied answer to the indirect question is 'no'. In Genesis, Abram obviously is unable to count the grains of sand that weigh so heavily in his promise. In 1 Samuel, the overly self-confident Goliath mocks Israel fully expecting that the Israelites will be unable to supply a champion to defeat him. This is brought out both by the emphatic 'I' (*'nî*) which he adds when proclaiming 'but if I am able to combat him', and by the terror-stricken reaction of Saul and the Israelites in the next line (17.11). The condescending remarks of the Assyrian military commander Rabshakeh in 2 Kings and Isaiah also imply that the Israelites are unable to produce chariot riders, hence their need for Egyptian support. Elihu's challenge to Job betrays his cocky and self-assured belief that he, and not Job, is correct. Even if we include the passages employing *h'yākôl* (Num. 22.38; 2 Chron. 32.13) we see that the implied answer to the rhetorical question is 'no'.

Another point that these passages have in common is their contexts of taunting and tests of faith. As we are told already in Gen. 15.1, Abram must believe in God's promise of children and land, neither of which he possesses at the present. It is clear from the use of the verbs 'defy' (*hērapî*) in 1 Sam. 17.10 and 'scorn' (*wayyibzēhû*) in 17.42, that Goliath's tone is one of taunting and mockery.<sup>13</sup> The daunting words of Rabshakeh (2 Kgs 18.23-24 [= Isa. 36.8]) also are poised to create fear and procure the surrender of Hezekiah's Jerusalem. Zophar's remarks (Job 11.2), Job's comments (19.3; 21.3; 30.1), and Elihu's boast (32.17-21) illustrate that each of Job's friends has retorted tauntingly to his trial. Similarly, in Num. 22.10 we are told explicitly that Balaam's intention is to curse Israel. One may add to this Sennacherib's boast in 2 Chronicles, which obviously is meant to intimidate.

The third aspect shared by these passages is one that bears most importantly upon our crux in Gen. 15.5: each prepares the reader for an unexpected twist of events. For Abram, this twist comes in the form of an unfolding drama in which Abram must question whether Lot, Eliezer or Ishmael will succeed him before Isaac eventually is born. The unexpected turn of events in 1 Samuel arrives when the small and ruddy boy David slays the expected victor Goliath. Rabshakeh meets his surprise when Yahweh thwarts his conquest by smiting eighty-five thousand of his contingent (2 Kgs 19.35). In the book of Job, God eventually

13. Waltke and O'Connor (*Introduction*, p. 322) note that David's reply in 1 Sam. 17.26 contains the interrogative language of insult.

vindicates Job and rewards him doubly after reprimanding his friends: 'You did not speak correctly of me as did my servant Job' (Job 42.7). In Numbers the reader unexpectedly finds Balaam blessing Israel instead of cursing it. Similarly, Sennacherib's taunts, despite their self-assuredness, are brought to shame when God annihilates the Assyrian army.

The shared features and contexts above illustrate that the biblical writers employed the *'im tûkal* and *h<sup>a</sup>yākôl* constructions for a specific function, namely, to set up the reader for an unexpected turn of events which hitherto have been thought impossible. Therefore, as Gen. 15.5 contains the expression *'im tûkal*, one should expect to find in the pericope this construction's common features. To demonstrate this I turn now to where we began, with Yahweh's promise:

'Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.'  
And he said unto him, 'Thus will your seed be' (15.5).

The first point of commonality was that the implied answer of the indirect question *'im tûkal* 'if you are able' is 'no'. That this is the case has not been argued. Scholars and exegetes frequently have noted Abram's inability to count the stars, explaining it on the basis of their innumerability. However, if we keep in mind the taunting, testing nature of the *'im tûkal* construction and that the sun does not set in the story until v. 12, a question naturally arises. What makes God's request to count the stars a test? The question is made even more poignant by the fact that we are not told that Abram ever attempted to count them. (Indeed, the medieval portrayal of Abram mentioned above, as one who rejected astrology, cannot be reconciled if he had numbered them!) It is here where the third aspect of the *'im tûkal* construction, its use as a foil to play unexpectedly upon the reader, comes into focus revealing the obvious, albeit overlooked solution to the crux: Abram could not number the stars because it was daylight!

Support for this reading comes partly from the word *šāmayim*, which though typically rendered in our verse as 'heaven(s)', that is, as the astral heavens, because of the mention of stars in the same verse,<sup>14</sup> also can mean 'daytime sky'.<sup>15</sup> For example, following Elijah's defeat of the prophets of Baal, we are told that 'the sky (*šāmayim*) grew black

14. The JPS, and KJV all have 'heavens', while the NIV has 'heaven'.

15. Though the NIV translates *šāmayim* as 'sky', it is doubtful that it was based on the solution to the crux suggested here.

with clouds' (1 Kgs 18.45). If it were nighttime, the sky would have been dark already. Compare also the story of the battle of Ai in which the narrator explicitly informs us that it is morning (Josh. 8.14) before telling us that Joshua's troops 'saw the smoke of the city rising to the sky (*haššāmay'mā*)' (8.20). Additional examples could be cited.<sup>16</sup>

Further support for this interpretation comes from the importance that Abram's faith is given in the pericope. According to Edwin Good, 'the thematic unity of the Abram story is woven about the thread of promise'.<sup>17</sup> The theological message that Abram's faith rested solely on Yahweh's promise is central to the narrative.<sup>18</sup> As the narrator puts it: 'He believed in Yahweh and he reckoned it to his merit' (15.6).<sup>19</sup> Had Abram seen stars, his faith would not have been based on the promise alone, but on a sign, a reading that Rashi, Abravanel and others have rejected on the basis of their understanding of this chapter as depicting Abram's departure from astrology. However, if we hold that he was unable to see any stars because they had not appeared yet, the supposed discrepancy vanishes and the significance of the divine promise and depth of Abram's faith are revealed. He was to trust on the promise alone.

Additional evidence in favor of this reading comes from a parallel divine promise concerning possession of the land in the very next verse (15.7). Here Yahweh promises Abram that he will inherit the land he sees before him. Yet, we are told soon afterwards that the land is inhabited by no less than ten different tribes (15.20). Thus, he is promised both progeny and land, which at that time were not visible realities. Again, Abram is called upon for blind faith.

A final piece of evidence may be garnered by addressing the issue of style. It will be noted that Genesis 15 is not the only place in the Bible where the reader is duped into forming a hasty conclusion. When Laban deceives Jacob by placing Leah instead of Rachel as his wife, the audience also is caught up in the trickery of the event (Gen. 29.23-25). Similarly, in search of the next king of Israel, Samuel leads us through the family of Jesse from son to son to son. We are told that he almost

16. E.g. 2 Kgs 2.1; 2.5; Job 35.5.

17. E.M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1981), p. 89.

18. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, p. 230 notes: 'God's covenant with Abram and Abram's faith appear as the kernel of what the Bible says about him'.

19. With Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 113.

anointed Eliab but that Yahweh stopped him, and that he also hesitated before Abinadab and Shammah (1 Sam. 16.6, 8, 9). Only after Samuel examined six of the seven sons does the realization become possible that David will be king.

If we are not persuaded to follow faulty assumptions, as we were with Jacob and Samuel, we often are spared essential facts for extended periods of time in order to build suspense.<sup>20</sup> In this way, as Joel Rosenberg tells us,<sup>21</sup> the narrator of 2 Samuel 6 keeps hidden the intended destination of the ark until it entered the City of David. Regarding the ironic suspense of our story, Edwin Good remarked:

The irony of the episode arises out of the theme of God's promise of the land to Abram. The first time Abram arrives in Canaan, the promise is given (ch. 12.7), and it is reiterated when he and Lot separate (ch. 13.14-17), in the covenant ceremony (ch. 15.7, 16, 18-21), and in the promise related to the circumcision (ch. 17.8). The land is Abram's by promise. Yet he must bargain with a Hittite over a purchase of a piece of it for a burial ground.<sup>22</sup>

It is in this vein that we also should view both the ironic use of the *'im tûkal* expression in Gen. 13.16 and the withholding of the sunset in Genesis 15 until v. 12. As for the former, the author has added the phrase 'if you are able' in order to dupe the reader into drawing a false analogy, to wit, that just as the grains of sand were innumerable in Gen. 13.16 due to their abundance, so too are the stars in 15.5. As for the latter, the author withheld knowledge of the sunset so that the reader would pause and contemplate the promise before coming to realize that it was then beyond any empirical verification.

In the light of the linguistic and comparative evidence, it is clear that Genesis 15 does not contain a chronological problem, nor does it bear witness to a tangled weaving of various sources and/or editors, but rather it is the device of a clever storyteller. The effectiveness of the author's trick may be due in part to the existence of a commonly used simile of people as stars. For example, in Deut. 1.10, 10.22, 28.62

20. L. Alonso Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Subsidia Biblica, 11; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1988), pp. 163-64; M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 309-20.

21. J. Rosenberg, *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 117.

22. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, p. 97.

and Isa. 40.26, the population of Israel is likened to stars in the sky. Thus it is possible that the author of Gen. 15.5 played on this expression.<sup>23</sup> This fits well with the author's exploitation of the reader's assumption that *šāmayim* means 'night sky' instead of 'day sky',<sup>24</sup> and the reader's foreknowledge that Abram later will have children and possess land. Indeed, the author of Gen. 15.5 created the puzzle and provided a clue to its resolution.<sup>25</sup> The supposed contradiction is meant to be glaring, to make us think twice about the divine promise. It probably would please the author of our pericope to no end to find out that the puzzle has been successful for centuries.

23. Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, pp. 221-22.

24. It is possible that the author deliberately used the verb *nbl* 'behold' to throw the reader off track, as its Akkadian cognate *nabātu* 'to shine' frequently is used in reference to illuminaries of the night sky (CAD, N1, p. 23, s.v. *nabātu*). Cf. Rashi's connection of the verb with stars in Gen. 15.5.

25. In case the reader missed the device, the author reminds us in v. 17 that the sun had set completely.