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Isaiah 53, Substitution, and the Covenant Curses—Part 2

by Richard M. Davidson



This article is Part 2. Part 1 was in the November/December 2009 issue, also available at www.newenglandpastor.com.

—Editors

A final linkage in Isaiah 53

to the covenant curses is breathtaking. Isa 53:8 indicates that the Suffering Servant “was cut off [from the Hebrew root *gwr*] from the land of the living, and for the transgression of My people He was stricken.” The Hebrew word here translated “cut off” is not the expected Hebrew *karat*, “cut [off]”, regularly used to describe the making, or literally “cutting” of a covenant, and the “cutting off” of transgressors. Instead, the Hebrew root *gwr* (“cutting [off], dividing”) harks back to the covenant-making ceremony of God with Abram in Genesis 15. Let’s briefly survey the striking details of that ceremony.

God graciously condescended to enter into a covenant of the kind that was understood in Abraham’s day so that Abraham could understand the assurance of the gospel.¹ Picture a scene somewhat repulsive to us of modern minds, and yet fraught with deep significance. A heifer three years old, a three-year old goat, and a three-year old ram, a turtledove and a young pigeon, all in the peak of health, slain with a stroke of the slaughter knife. The larger animals are cut in two down the middle, and each half laid beside the other, and the birds, left whole, are laid opposite one another, with room for someone to pass through the row of paired carcasses.

The vultures come down to eat the pieces, but Abram drives them away. The sun sets. A deep sleep settles upon the man who has slain the animals and separated their parts. The sleep is followed by a dread and great darkness. All is silence and blackness. Suddenly out of the darkness appears a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch. The pot and torch slowly pass between the pieces of the

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dead animals. The ceremony is complete.

What does it all mean? Moses explicitly states in Gen 15:18 that on this day “the Lord made [Hebrew *karat*] a covenant with Abram.” Throughout the Bible when it states (in English) that God made a covenant, the Hebrew word for “made” is usually *karat*, literally, “cut.” This expression of “cutting” a covenant refers to the common practice in ancient Near Eastern times of making a covenant by cutting a sacrifice and walking between the pieces. In Jer 34:18-19 we find a reference to this practice still in use in Jeremiah’s day. God says to those in Judah who broke the covenant they made with the Lord: “And I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant,

who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made [*karat*] before Me, when they cut [*karat*] the calf in two and passed between the parts of it—the princes of Judah, the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. . . .”

In the ancient Near Eastern treaties, when a suzerain (overlord) entered into a treaty/covenant with a vassal (servant state), he would regularly have them cut a sacrifice and pass through the pieces. What is important for us to note here is what the vassal was in effect acknowledging by passing through the pieces: “May it be done to me as was done to this animal if I am unfaithful to the covenant.”

We have numerous illustrations of this practice in the ancient Near East, with the king saying to the vassal, “If you do not remain faithful to the covenant, it will happen to you as to this animal.”² Note, for example, the covenant made by the Assyrian king Ashur-nirari V with the vassal Mati-ilu. After Mati-ilu divides a ram, Ashur-nirari V says: “This head is not the head of the ram, but the head of Mati-ilu, his sons, his nobles, and the people of the land. If Mati-ilu violates this oath, as the head of this ram is struck off, . . .so will the head of Mati-ilu be struck off.”³ The one passing through the pieces, by so doing, indicates that he will undergo similar dismemberment if he is unfaithful to the covenant.

Now it was expected for the vassal to pass through the pieces and in effect make this kind of dismemberment oath. Note that in Jeremiah 34 it was the people that passed through the pieces, and the Assyrian king threatens the vassal with dismemberment for violating the covenant. But Genesis 15 doesn’t even mention that Abraham passed through

the pieces, although the parallel ancient Near Eastern covenant pattern makes this act on his part likely. Ellen White mentions that he did pass through,⁴ and this could be implied in his very act of arranging the animals (v. 10), but this is not the point emphasized in the Genesis 15 account. The point emphasized is that, radically contrary to ancient Near Eastern practice, where only the vassal and not the suzerain moved through the pieces, God Himself, the Divine Suzerain or Overlord, passed through the pieces! The reference to the smoking oven and the burning torch are symbols of the divine presence, reminiscent of the smoking fire on Mt Sinai. The same two Hebrew words connoting the divine presence link these two events together: “smoke” *’ashan* (Genesis 15:17; Exodus 19:18; 20:18) and “lamp” *lappid* (Genesis 15:17; Exodus 20:18).

Why *two* symbols of the divine presence in Gen 15? I’m convinced that it is significant that both a smoking oven and the burning torch passed through—two divine light sources, symbolizing the Father and the Son. Over and over in the narratives recorded in Genesis and Exodus, we find the Angel of the Lord both *sent* from Yahweh, and yet saying, “I *am* Yahweh.”⁵ There is the implication of two divine beings in the Godhead involved in these narratives. As both the Father and Son appeared at Mt. Sinai,⁶ so both Father and Son were involved in the covenant-making ceremony with Abraham. The poignant truth is that as the Father and the Son pass through the pieces of the sacrifices, Divinity is saying, in effect, “If we break our promise of the covenant, then let the Godhead be dismembered, let Divinity be ripped from divinity, as these pieces.” In effect, the Father and Son were placing their very existence and unity on the line in this oath of covenant loyalty! That’s how sure is the Gospel promise!

What is even more amazing to me is that Abram and his descendants *did* break the covenant, and instead of us, the vassals, being dismembered, the Godhead stepped into our place and took the

covenant curses in our stead (Gal 3:10-13). The choice of the animals that Abram was to sacrifice is instructive, as these are the very animals that were at the heart of the sacrificial system in Leviticus. They point to the substitutionary sacrifice of the Messiah taking the place of us sinners. The narrative of Genesis 22, the offering up of Isaac on Mt. Moriah, is instructive in typifying how both the Father and Son were involved in the anguish of the atoning sacrifice.

We’ve noted above that the description of the work of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53 uses the very terms as described in the covenant curses of Isaiah 1 and Deuteronomy 28. He bears the “sicknesses” and “stripes” that we deserved, and the Lord laid on Him the iniquity of us all. The linkage of Isaiah 53 with Genesis 15 is revealed in a striking way. The Hebrew word for the “[cut-off or separated] pieces [of a slaughtered animal]” that the divine Presence passed through in Gen 15:17, is from the root *gZR*, and this root appears again in the Hebrew Bible in a sacrificial context only in Isa 53:8, as already quoted above: “He was cut off [*gZR*] from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My people He was stricken.” By using this rare word for being sacrificially “cut [off],” Isaiah links the divine passing through the pieces in Gen 15 with the death of the Messiah.

Daniel 9:26-27 further links the Messiah’s death with the cutting of the covenant portrayed in Gen 15. According to the prophecy in the midst of the week the Anointed One (Messiah) would be “cut off”—and the Hebrew word here is *karat* which means both “cut off” as in death and “cut” as in covenant making. So the Messiah was “cut off” (died) to “cut” the new covenant. This is the same word as found in Gen 15:18 for God’s making (literally “cutting”) of the covenant.

For the ultimate fulfillment of this covenant-making service in Genesis 15, alluded to also in Isaiah 53 and Daniel 9—to see the ultimate depth of the gospel, we must go to Calvary. On the cross we hear Jesus’ anguished words, as He takes

upon Himself the covenant curses that we deserved: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” In light of God’s implied oath of Self-dismemberment in Genesis 15, this takes on incredible meaning. Ellen White points out that on the cross, as Jesus became the Sin-bearer, the unity of the Father and Son was broken up and Jesus felt the anguish of eternal separation from His Father.⁷ In terms of Genesis 15, as it were, God was ripped from God! Deity was torn from deity! Divine dismemberment took place so that we might live! Christ took our curses as our Substitute and Surety, suffering the agony of eternal separation between God and man that we deserved, so that we might have the covenant blessings of eternal life. That’s how sure our acceptance with God is! Amazing Gospel of substitutionary, covenant grace!

1 See Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1958), 137.

2 See Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1-17*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990), 430-434, for samples of these treaties.

3 James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 353-354.

4 See White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, 137.

5 Cf. Gen 16:7-11 with v. 13; 18:1 with vv. 2, 33, and with 19:1; 31:11 with v. 13; 32:24, 30 with Hos 12:3-6; 48:15, with v. 16; Exod 3:2 with vv. 4, 6, and 7; and 13:21 with 14:19.

6 See White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1970), 616.

7 See Idem., *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1940), 686, 753-754, etc.

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