

Genesis 15:1-21

Verse 15:3

וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם הֵן לִי לֹא נִתְּמָה זָרַע וְהִנֵּה בֶן-בֵּיתִי יוֹרֵשׁ אֹתִי

Well, this was a tough one in spite of the fact that I recognized and understood each word in this verse. But my reading and my initial, literal, mechanical translation made no sense. For example, here's my first pass mechanical translation:

And-said Avram, "behold! To me not have-you-given seed and behold a-son-of-my-house possessing it.

I had never encountered this phrase, "a son of my house possessing it". So, as is my practice I rewrote the mechanical translation keeping the strict word-for-word mapping, but rewording where it made sense to an English reader.

And Avram said, "Behold, you have not given to me seed. But, behold, a son-of-my-house [is] possessing it.

Context:

Context really helps here. In this verse, we have a continuation of Abram's response to God's promise that his (Abram's) reward would be great. Paraphrases are very good for expressing context, so, let's paraphrase verses 1, 2, and 3. In script form, the conversation (Genesis 15:1-3) might go something like this:

[GOD] Not to worry. Your reward will be great.

[ABRAM] What does that mean? I continue to be childless and unless I have a son, Eliezer my servant will be my heir! Look, my heir will be a son of my house, but not of my seed. What's going on here, LORD?

Using a paraphrase in this way to capture Abram's frustration was very helpful. The clue was using the same word, "behold" or "look here", twice in the same verse. This is very, very emphatic. In other words, a good translation will employ words that convey Abram's frustration.

But, there's more. All other commercial translations that I've examined wrongly translate the Hebrew verb, נתַּתָּ (natattah), meaning "you gave" – a simple 2nd person singular Qal verb – as a past perfect ("have given"). There is simply no grammatical support¹ for the use of the past perfect in this verse and its use diminishes the immediacy of Abram's distress. In effect, Abram has had enough of God's promises. Now, in response to yet another promise, Abram confronts God with what is essentially an accusation based on Abram's expectation that he should have had heirs by this time. So he asserts,

*"You **gave** to me no offspring."*

There is no escaping the perception that Abram is really frustrated². The use of the past perfect, however, suggests that Abram may still be willing to wait.

"You have given to me no offspring..."

The use of a past perfect construction leaves room for an implied 'yet'. This is just inconsistent with Abram's clear and objective frustration. Now, lest you think this is a bridge too far, you'll see when we translate verse 6, that this idea that Abram may be beyond frustration and possibly angry makes perfect sense and brings into sharp focus the motivation for Abram's judgment of God.

Translations

(note: the past perfect translations are underlined below)

Mine:

And Abram said, "Behold, you gave me no offspring so, instead, my heir will be a son of my house, but not of my seed!"

NRS

And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir."

NIV

And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household

¹ Either by Zevitt's rule or the more commonly used verb-subject inversion (subject precedes verb).

² I would note that the English translation of the Septuagint (the LXE) is the only other translation that imputes an emotional Abram. The LXE describes Abram's emotional state as 'grieved' where I would have used 'frustrated' or even 'angry'.

will be my heir."

LXE

And Abram said, I am grieved since thou hast given me no seed, but my home-born servant shall succeed me.

KJV

And Abram said, "Since You have given no ²offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir."

NET

Abram added,⁹ "Since¹⁰ you have not given me a descendant, then look, one born in my house will be my heir!"

KJV

And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir.