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The Meaning of “Believed” in Genesis 15:6

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Introduction

According to Genesis 15:6, Abraham, in response to God's promise that he would have a son (vs 4-5), "*believed* the Lord, and he [the Lord] counted it to him [Abraham] as righteousness."¹ The importance of this passage for New Testament theology is evident by the fact that Paul refers to it in both Galatians 3:6 and Romans 4:3, while James quotes it in James 2:23. Furthermore, a considerable portion of Hebrews 11 speaks about Abraham's "faith" (vs 8-19), which is a term related to his *belief* in the Lord's promise made in Genesis 15:4-5.

This paper will analyze the literary context in which the statement (in Genesis 15:6) about Abraham was made. It will also explore the meaning of the Hebrew verb אָמַן (*āman*), translated in Genesis 15:6 as "believed," as well as other words derived from the root אָמַן (*mn*). This will be done by surveying its usage in the Old Testament, as well as considering how the Greek Septuagint (LXX)² translated אָמַן. Finally, the theological implications of Genesis 15:6 will be considered in light of the New Testament writings that allude to it.

The Literary Context of Genesis 15:6

Abraham is introduced in the Genesis record in the latter part of chapter 11. A descendant of Shem (Gen 11:1-26),³ Abraham is assumed to be a worshipper of Yahweh: "Now the Lord [יהוה, Yahweh] said to Abram [אַבְרָם], 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you'" (Gen 12:1). In obedience to Yahweh's call, "Abram

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture quotations in this paper will be taken from the *English Standard Version* (ESV).

² The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

³ Genesis 11 presents a ten-generation genealogy of Shem to Abraham.

went” (vs 4).⁴ After his arrival in the land of Canaan, Yahweh promised Abraham, “To your offspring I will give this land.” In response, Abraham, though he had no land or children, “built there an altar to the Lord” (vs 7), indicating his trust that Yahweh would fulfill what he promised. As Abraham and his family journeyed in Canaan, “he built an altar to the Lord [again] and called upon the name of the Lord” (vs 8). This seems to be a pattern in Genesis for those who worship Yahweh.⁵

Because of “a famine in the land,” Abraham “went down to Egypt to sojourn there” (vs 10). Thus far in the narrative, Abraham’s confidence in Yahweh seems to be unshaken. But in Egypt, he persuades his wife Sarah to tell the Egyptians that she was his sister (vs 11-14). If he was going to inherit the land and have children according to Yahweh’s promise, why would he fear that the Egyptians would take his life upon discovering his true relationship with Sarah? Though not explicit in the passage, Abraham’s experience in Egypt indicates that his trust in Yahweh wavered.

In Genesis 13, upon returning to Canaan from Egypt, Abraham and his nephew Lot part ways (vs 1-13). Yahweh appeared to Abraham a third time in the narrative, reaffirming his promise to give him land and a son (vs 14-17). Again, Abraham responds by building an altar to Yahweh (vs 18), indicating his trust that Yahweh would fulfill his promise. In Genesis 14, Abraham rescues his nephew Lot, who had been captured by an alliance of kings who invaded Sodom (vs 1-16). Abraham was blessed by a man named Melchizedek, who is referred to as a

⁴ According to Hebrews 11:8, it was “by faith [that] Abraham obeyed when he was called [by Yahweh] to go.” The Greek word that the author of Hebrews used to describe what caused Abraham “to go” is the noun πίστις (*pistis*). The Greek verb πιστεύω (*pisteuō*) is the most commonly used word to represent the Hebrew אָמַן (*’āman*) in the Septuagint (including in Genesis 15:6). Both אָמַן and πιστεύω indicate trust in the truthfulness and reliability of a person.

⁵ Noah built an altar for Yahweh after the flood (Gen 8:20). In addition to Noah and Abraham (Gen 13:8), Isaac (Gen 26:25), Jacob (Gen 33:20; 35:1-7) and Moses (Ex 17:15) built altars as an expression of faith and trust in Yahweh.

“priest of God Most High” (vs 18-20). In return, Abraham gave Melchizedek “a tenth of everything” (vs 20).

In Genesis 15, Yahweh comes to a childless Abraham a fourth time in the narrative. In a vision, he began, “Fear not, Abram...” (vs 1), indicating that Abraham may have been wondering/wavering concerning the fulfillment of the promise of a child. Abraham’s response seems to confirm this, “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless” (vs 2). Abraham suggests that Eliezer, one of his servants, be considered his child (vs 3). But God responded, “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son [“one who will come from your own body,” NKJV] will be your heir” (vs 4). Then God points toward the stars in heaven and says to Abraham, “So shall your descendants be” (vs 5, NASB).

It’s important to note that at this point in the narrative, Abraham had good reason, at least from a human point of view, to question the possibility of an actual son being born to him. Sarah “was barren” (Gen 11:30; cf 18:11) and ninety years of age, while Abraham was one hundred years old (Gen 17:17; cf 18:11).⁶ Nevertheless, “he believed [אָמַן] the Lord [יהוה, Yahweh], and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15:6).

While this is the first time in Genesis that the Hebrew verb אָמַן (*āman*) appears, it has been implicit in the narrative that יהֱאֱמִן “he [Abraham] believed [had faith in]” בִּיהוָה “the Lord [Yahweh]” all along (albeit with moments of unbelief). The rest of this paper will explore the meaning of אָמַן (*āman*) in the broader context of the Hebrew Scriptures,⁷ followed by a

⁶ And according to Paul, Abraham “believed against hope....He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrens of Sarah’s womb” (Rom 4:18-19).

⁷ It is not within the scope of this paper to explore the meanings of the Hebrew words יִחְשַׁבְּהָ “credited” and צְדָקָה “righteousness.”

conclusion of the theological implications of Abraham's belief (trust) in Yahweh's promise according to the New Testament.

Meaning of אָמַן⁸

Again, Genesis 15:6 reads, “And he [Abraham] believed (וַיֵּאֱמָן) the Lord (בְּיְהוָה), and he credited it to him as righteousness.” According to R. W. L. Moberly, the verb אָמַן (*āman*) in Genesis 15:6 is “a perfect with *waw* consecutive [implying consistency with a past state]. The point appears to be, therefore, that Abraham's trusting response to God's promise in 15:4–5 is one notable example of the response to God that consistently characterized his life, evident already in Gen 12:1–4; 13:14–17.”⁹

The verb אָמַן (*āman*) appears in the Old Testament 95 times and is translated as “believed,” “believe” or “believes” 38 times in the *English Standard Version* (ESV). It is also translated as “faith” or “faithful” 18 times. In other places, it is translated as “trustworthy” (3 times), and “reliable” (2 times). A.C. Fenlason observes that אָמַן (*āman*) conveys either (1) the state of being faithful or (2) the act of trusting in someone or believing something is true.¹⁰ In the former, God's word is trustworthy (1 Kgs 8:26) and God is “faithful” (Deut 7:9; Isa 49:7). Israel proved to be unfaithful to God's covenant (Ps 78:37), but sometimes people are commended for being trustworthy (Pr 11:13; 25:13). In Genesis 15:6 (as in Isa 28:16), אָמַן appears in the causative form to indicate Abraham's trust in Yahweh. According to Numbers 14:11, the children

⁸ The Hebrew Bible uses two other verbs that are in the same semantic domain as אָמַן (*āman*). They are בָּטַח (*bāṭah*), which is often translated as “trust,” and יָרָא (*yārē*), which is often translated as “fear.”

⁹ Moberly, R.W.L. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, W. VanGemeren (Ed.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 432.

¹⁰ Fenlason, A. C. “Belief” in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*. Lexham Press. Davis, D. L., D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, & R. Hurst (Eds.), 2014.

of Israel did not “believe” in Yahweh, but in 2 Chronicles 20:20, deliverance for the people of Judah came through אָמַן (*āman*) in Yahweh.

The noun אֱמֶת (*emet*) means reliability, security, fidelity, truth and is the most common form of the root אָמַן. According to Exodus 34:6, God abounds in אֱמֶת (“faithfulness”). When the queen of Sheba visited Jerusalem, she said to Solomon, “The report was true [אֱמֶת] that I heard in my own land of your words and of your wisdom” (1 Kgs 10:6). The Psalmist celebrates God’s law as אֱמֶת (Ps 119:43). Hosea says, “There is no faithfulness [אֱמֶת] in Israel” (Hos 4:1).

The word אֱמוּנָה (*emûnâ*), which is often rendered “faithfulness,” is also related to the character of Yahweh (Deut 32:4; Ps 36:5). Jeremiah proclaimed, “Great is your faithfulness [אֱמוּנָה]” (Lam 3:23). It is often used as the opposite of שֶׁקֶר (*šeqer*), which means falsehood, deception, and lying (Pr 12:22). In Habakkuk 2:4, the righteous lives by אֱמוּנָה (*emûnâ*).¹¹

The adverb אָמֵן (*āmēn*) appears 30 times in the Hebrew Bible and is transliterated as “amen” 27 times. It is spoken in response to what is said by someone who is trustworthy. For example, after David’s song, “all the people said, ‘Amen’ [אָמֵן] and praised the Lord” (1 Chron 16:36). The basic meaning of אָמֵן is “let it be so,” or “may it come true.” In Genesis 15:6, when it says Abraham “believed,” Abraham wasn’t merely saying, “let it be so,” or “amen,” when God promised he’d have a son.

Moberly observes, “To say אָמֵן genuinely is an act of self-commitment, for it implies appropriate action on the part of the speaker. For example, when the people of Israel respond to

¹¹ The two most important passages in the Hebrew Bible that use the root אָמַן to communicate the language of “believe,” “trust,” and “faith,” so theologically significant in the New Testament, is Habakkuk 2:4, used in Romans 1:7, Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38 and Genesis 15:6, used in Galatians 3:6, Romans 4:3, and James 2:23. In Habakkuk 2:4, the noun אֱמוּנָה (*emûnâ*) is used, whereas, in Genesis 15:6, the verb אָמַן (*āman*) is used.

the Levites' solemn pronouncements of curses with 'amen' (Deut 27:14–26), they are committing themselves to abhor and avoid those courses of action to which the curse is attached. Similarly, when the Jews respond with 'amen' to Nehemiah's imprecation on those who do not remit debts to their fellow Jews, they thereby commit themselves to a particular course of action, which they then carry out (Neh 5:13)."¹²

The Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures uses the verb πιστεύω (*pisteuō*) to render the Hebrew אָמַן (*āman*) in Genesis 15:6. In John 3:16, whoever “believes” (πιστεύω, *pisteuō*) in Jesus will “not perish but have eternal life.” Whenever Paul speaks of Abraham's faith, he uses the Greek noun πίστις (*pistis*), which is a common rendering of the Hebrew nouns אֱמֶת (*emet*) and אֱמוּנָה (*emûnâ*). For example, in Romans 4:16-20, Paul speaks of the πίστις (*pistis*, “faith”) of Abraham. Hebrews 11 is about the faith (πίστις, *pistis*) of many characters in the Old Testament, among whom is Abraham. Thus the Hebrew verb אָמַן (*āman*), and the nouns אֱמוּנָה (*emûnâ*) and אֱמֶת (*emet*), as well as the adverb אָמֵן (*āmēn*) were important theological words for Jesus and New Testament writers, who thought in Hebrew.

Theological Implications

Why was it theologically significant that Abraham's faith in God was enough to put him in a right relationship with God (Gen 15:6)? As has been noted, Paul quotes Genesis 15:5 in Galatians 3:6 and Romans 4:3. Why does Paul appeal to Abraham's faith in these letters? There was a group of Jewish disciples who had a high regard for Abraham and who were convinced Paul was wrong in not requiring Gentile believers to be circumcised (Acts 15:1, 5). When this issue came before the apostles in Jerusalem, Peter agreed with Paul, “God, who knows the heart,

¹² Moberly, R.W.L. *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, W. VanGemeren (Ed.). (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 428.

bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith [*pistis*]" (Acts 15:8-9). Though the outcome of the Jerusalem council was in Paul's favor, the issue did not go away.

Throughout his ministry, Paul was having to defend his conviction that *pistis* in Jesus, and not circumcision ("works of the law"), constituted the criteria for full inclusion/membership into Abraham's family. Thus, in Galatians 3, Paul asks the rhetorical question, "Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law [circumcision] or by hearing with faith [*pistis*]" (vs 2). He continues, "just as 'Abraham believed [*pisteuō*] God, and it was counted to him as righteousness" (vs 6). Paul then concludes, "Know then that it is those of faith [*pistis*] who are the sons of Abraham" (vs 7). It was God's plan all along, says Paul, to "justify [declare as righteous] the [uncircumcised] Gentiles by faith [*pistis*]" (vs 8).

In Romans, Paul is dealing with the same issue. After asking the rhetorical questions, "Or is God the God of the [circumcised] Jews only? Is he not the God of [uncircumcised] Gentiles also?" (Rom 3:29), he concludes that God "will justify the circumcised by faith [*pistis*] and the uncircumcised through faith [*pistis*]" (vs 30). Then in Romans 4, as in Galatians 3, Paul appeals to Abraham. After quoting Genesis 15:6 and Psalms 32:1-2, Paul makes the point that Abraham was counted as righteous (Gen 15) before circumcision (Gen 17) through *pistis* (Rom 4:11). Therefore, circumcision is not what determines whether a person is a child of Abraham, but rather faith (*pistis*), which "Abraham had *before* he was circumcised" (vs 12). Again, it is not only the person who is circumcised who is guaranteed the promise, "but also to the one who shares the faith [*pistis*] of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (vs 16).

James also quotes Genesis 15:6 in James 2:23, but for reasons that were different from Paul's. James is making the point that "faith [*pistis*] apart from works is useless [actually non-

existent]” (vs 20). In fact, James goes as far as to say that “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (vs 24). And he appeals to Abraham to validate his point. For James, Abraham’s *pistis* was the context, rather than a substitute, for obedience. Like Paul, James is trying to address a concrete issue with his original audience. “If a brother or sister,” James wrote, “is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith [*pistis*] by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (vs 15-17). Abraham not only “believed” [*pisteuō*] God, but he obeyed God. For James the two (belief and obedience) are inseparable. Because Abraham “believed,” he obeyed, and the fact that Abraham obeyed demonstrates that he truly believed (vs 18).

In Hebrews 11:8-19, Abraham’s belief/trust/faith (*pistis*) in God is held up as an example for Jesus’ followers. Alluding to Genesis 12:1, the author of Hebrews wrote, “By faith [*pistis*] Abraham obeyed when he was called out...” In agreement with James, he portrays Abraham’s belief as not merely a cognitive acceptance of an abstract idea for which he lacked proof. Instead, his confidence was established on the conviction that God was faithful. This conviction enabled Abraham to leave his country, “not knowing where he was going” (Heb 11:8).

In conclusion, the Hebrew verb אָמַן (*āman*) in Genesis 15:6, translated as “believed,” describes Abraham’s act of accepting God’s promise as true based upon the perceived faithfulness of the one being trusted. “No unbelief [*apistēō*] made him waver concerning the promise of God...[Abraham was] fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why faith [*pistis*] was ‘counted to him as righteousness’ (Rom 4:20-22). Abraham “believed” God, and this was all that was necessary for him to be in a right relationship with

God. All that God asks is that humans trust him fully. Every right decision and every good work will spring from a life that has been surrendered in complete trust to him.

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