

Whose Righteousness - God's or Abram's?

Another Look at Genesis 15:6

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All most all commercial English translations of Genesis 15:6 show that God justifies Abram on the basis of his (Abram's) faith. This understanding, among Christians in particular, can be largely traced to St. Paul's reading of the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew of Genesis 15:6. St. Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 in a number of places, but Romans 4:3 is typical:

For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (NRS)

For comparison, here's Brenton's English translation of Romans 4:3 from the Septuagint,

And Abram believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.

You can see at once that Paul has correctly, if not exactly, quoted the Septuagint's text. A straightforward reading of the English translation of the Septuagint is unambiguous - God is impressed with Abram's willingness of believe in His promises despite no tangible evidence of fulfillment and so judges Abram as righteous.

All English Bibles, like the Septuagint, as far as I have been able to determine, translate Genesis 15:6 to show that Abram was deemed righteous because of his trust/belief in God. Indeed, the NRS translation of Genesis 15:6 is unambiguous. In their translation, they add "the LORD" as the subject of 'reckoned'.

"And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Again, as for the Septuagint, a straightforward reading of the NRS translation unambiguously supports Paul's interpretation that Abram was deemed righteous by Abram's willingness to place his faith in God.

On the other hand, the KJV's translation of 15:6, by contrast, is somewhat less explicit.

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The KJV translators chose to insert the indefinite personal pronoun ‘he’ (colored red, below) as the subject of ‘counted’. Here is the KJV’s translation:

*“And he believed in the LORD; and **he** counted it to him for righteousness.”*

The use of ‘he’ introduces grammatical ambiguity into the verse because, written this way, the antecedent of ‘he’ can be either Abram or God. Now, the KJV translation is not alone in using ‘he’. In fact, many (most?) English Biblesⁱ also have added ‘he’ to the translation as the subject of the second verb.

There is, however, an alternative understanding of this verse. An understanding that runs counter to Christian tradition (and Paul’s interpretation) but, moreover, has the merit of being consistent with the underlying Hebrew text upon which both English and Greek translations are ultimately basedⁱⁱ. So, let’s take a careful look at the actual Hebrew text of this verse.

We begin with context. In the previous verse, Genesis 15:5, God makes a promise to Abram that Abram’s descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky. Upon hearing this, the Hebrew Bible records Abram’s response as follows (read from right-to-left):

צְדָקָה	לוֹ	וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ	בַּיהוָה	וַיֵּאֱמֶן
righteousness	to-him	and-reckoned-it ²	in-the-LORD	[Once again] ³ he-believed
<i>tzə-da-qah</i>	<i>llo</i>	<i>vay-yach-shə-ve-ha</i>	<i>ba-Yahweh</i>	<i>və-he-eh-min</i>

In the table above, the second row is a direct, word-for-word, translation of the Hebrew in the first row. The third row is the transcription of the Hebrew.

Because this is a direct translation of the Hebrew text contains no added words or punctuation has been added. Without added words or punctuation, the simplest interpretation of the Hebrew reveals that God’s righteousness is in view, not Abrams.

First consider the third Hebrew word, *vayyachshveha*, which is translated using three English words, “and-reckoned-it”. Now, *vayyachshveha* is a third person, masculine, singular

² Other translations include words such as ‘counted’, ‘attributed’, ‘reckoned’, ‘thought’, etc.

³ The translation incorporates Max Roland’s argument that this verb is better parsed as waw-consecutive perfect (wəqatal) suggesting a repetitive action. See Max Rogland’s article, “Abram’s Persistent Faith”, WTJ 70 (2008):239-244. Also at https://www.academia.edu/492280/_Abram_s_Persistent_Faith_Hebrew_Verb_Semantics_in_Genesis_15_6_Westminster_Theological_Journal_70_2008_239-244

verb for which the subject pronoun, 'he' is implied when not made explicit. This may be why the English translators of many commercial Bibles (e.g., the KJV) added 'he' to the English translation which then would read, "*and-he-reckoned-it*". But, the use of 'he' introduces an ambiguity that does not exist in the Hebrew as translated aboveⁱⁱⁱ. By adding 'he' the subject of verb ('reckoned') is ambiguous in that it can refer to either God or Abram. For example, compare the KJV's translation with the direct (no added text) translation of the Hebrew:

(KJV) "*And he believed in the LORD; and **he** counted it to him for righteousness.*"

(HEB) "*Once again he believed in the LORD and reckoned it to him righteousness.*"

While the KJV's translation is ambiguous, the Hebrew version unambiguously expresses Abram as the verb's subject. The reason is simple and one you will recognize immediately in the following example:

Jim jogged through the park but walked home.

Jim is the subject of both verbs, 'jogged' and 'walked'. Here is another example more like Genesis 15:5-6:

Jim's father, Mr. Anderson, promised his son a new car upon Jim's graduation.

Jim was very grateful and reckoned his dad to be generous.

Again, in this example, Jim is the subject of both verbs, 'was' and 'reckoned'. The Hebrew of 15:6 is similarly constructed. The verse exists as two independent, but connected clauses of which only the first has an explicit subject. In such cases, both English and Hebrew grammars (and many (most?) other languages, by the way) require that the subject of the first clause also be the subject of the second^{iv}. Thus, Abram must be the subject of the second verb or, rewritten with all the subject pronouns fully expressed:

And Abram believed in the LORD and Abram reckoned it to the LORD as righteousness.

This verse, then, carries a simple, but theologically profound message: Abram finally comes to recognize God's righteousness^v and that righteousness, in this context, is based on the faithfulness of God. God is faithful, realizes Abram, and therefore righteous.

There is still an unresolved ambiguity, however – what is the antecedent of 'it' (colored

red), as in the translation below?

*“And he believed in the LORD and counted **it** to him as righteousness.”*

The answer requires another small bit of Hebrew grammar. Like many other languages (but unlike English), Hebrew is inflected for gender. So, for example, Hebrew nouns and pronouns are either male, female, or neutral depending on to what or to whom they refer. In this verse, the pronoun ‘it’ is inflected as feminine and so must refer to a feminine noun. However, the only feminine noun in this verse is ‘righteousness’ which makes no sense. For example, when righteousness is substituted for the pronoun, ‘it’ we get:

*“And he believed in the LORD and counted **righteousness** to him as righteousness.”*

Such a translation is nonsense. So, what is its antecedent? The first clause gives us a clue when the author states that Abram believed in God; or to put it more explicitly, Abram believed that God spoke the truth when He promised Abram’s descendants to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. In Hebrew, the word for truth (אֱמֶת (emet)) is feminine and so fits perfectly with the context and grammar of 15:5-6. Just for completeness, we can rewrite 15:6 “the truth of God’s promises” as the antecedent of ‘it’. Doing so we have,

“And he believed in the LORD and counted [the truth of God’s promises] to him as righteousness.”

With this in mind, a straight forward, unadorned reading of 15:5-6, paraphrased for clarity but consistent with the Hebrew text (i.e., no added words and therefore no ambiguity), would read something like this...

5... "Look toward heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them." And He said to Abram, "So shall your descendants be." 6Once again, Abram believed in the LORD and thought the truth of God’s promises to be evidence of the LORD’s righteousness.

Summary

The exegesis of this famous verse contradicts the nearly universal Christian understanding that Abram was deemed righteous by God because of his persistent faith. As it happens, a plain reading of the text that it was Abram who deemed God as righteous, not the

other way around^{vi}. So, the question that arises is how could St. Paul have made such an egregious error? Well, it turns out that the error was not his. It seems that the authors of the Septuagint made the same mistake as our Bible translators made 2400 years later. Here, again, is the English translation of the Septuagint's version of 15:6:

And Abram believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

One explanation for this mistranslation may be related to a misunderstanding of the underlying Hebrew verb, namely, the Greek verb from which 'reckoned' is translated is in the passive voice ("it was reckoned"). However, the underlying Hebrew verb from which the Greek was translated, is in the active voice. Constructed using the passive voice, the antecedent of 'it' must be God. The mistake was not St. Paul's. He simply quoted the Septuagint's mistranslation of 15:6.

End Notes

ⁱ See for example the list of English Bibles that are the result of a simple search at Bible Hub (<http://biblehub.com/genesis/15-6.htm>). The majority use the indefinite pronoun, but a significant minority use God, LORD, Jehovah, or Yahweh as its antecedent.

ⁱⁱ Most English translations of Genesis 15:6 are derived from Paul's quoting of the Septuagint which, as we know, is the Greek translation of the ancient Hebrew text.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hebrew, like English, has a perfectly good, explicit, and standalone word for the pronoun 'he'. Unlike the later translators of this verse, the Hebrew author chose NOT to specify the pronoun. Presumably because of the grammatical ambiguity its use would have caused.

^{iv} Note that all English translations (of which I am aware) *insert* a semi-colon (or period) between the two clauses. By inserting punctuation separating the two clauses in this way, the multi-clause, single-subject rule is voided.

^v This is the first use of 'righteousness' in the Bible. It seems fitting, somehow, that this use of righteousness would describe God, not the human, Abram.

^{vii} Among the more well-known Jewish scholars this claim is arguable. Rashi agrees with the Christian interpretation, Rambam disagrees arguing that Abram is praising God's righteousness.