

As It Is Written

As it is written, Genesis 15:6 reveals to us Abram's response to God's promise of descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky (15:5)

"And he believed in the LORD and reckoned¹ it to him as righteousness."

However, most (all?) commercial translations of this verse add extra words, punctuation, or both that are not in the original Hebrew. These additions are unwarranted (as we shall learn below) and lead to significant ambiguity. Even worse, the added words lead more than a few Bibles to contradict each other outright. Consider, for example, the NRS and the KJV translations of this verse:

*"And he believed the LORD; and **the LORD** reckoned it to him as righteousness. (NRS)"*

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

In both of these verses the Bible's translators added punctuation and words in order to convey what they believed the original Hebrew meant. In this paper, we'll look at the original Hebrew and try to glean its original meaning.

We begin noting that, with respect to this verse, we have two important questions to resolve. They are:

1. Who is the subject of the second verb, 'reckoned'?
2. What is the antecedent of 'it'?²

With respect to the first question, the NRS claims the "the LORD" is the subject of the second verb. The KJV is ambiguous at best because the pronoun '**he**' can refer to either God or Abram. If the subject is Abram (as some³ scholars believe), then the two translations are mutually exclusive. Which is right?

The answer lies in some simple grammar common to both Hebrew and English; specifically, the rule governing sentences with two clauses in which the subject of the verb in the second clause is not specified. In such cases, both English and Hebrew specify that the subject of the first clause IS the subject of the second. Here's simple example:

Jim ran to the store but walked home.

In this example, we have two clauses and Jim is the subject of both verbs (*ran* and

¹ Or counted, attributed, reckoned, thought, etc.

² That is, to what does the pronoun 'it' refer?

³ Mostly Jewish and secular scholars, but also evangelical ones – see, for example, professor Victor P. Hamilton's *New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Eerdmans 1990), Vol. I at p. 425:

walked). Now, let's apply this rule to Genesis 15:6. Here's a straightforward translation of the original Hebrew - without the added semi-colon or verb subjects:

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

As in the English example above, Abram is the subject of both 'believed' and 'counted'⁴. To be more explicit, we can write this with the subject pronouns replaced by their antecedents:

*"And [**Abram**] believed in the LORD and [**Abram**] counted it to him as righteousness."*

So, at least one way of interpreting the KJV's translation gets it right. Abram counts God as being righteous not, as the NRS has it, the other way around – God counting Abram as Righteous.

This presents a serious theological problem for Christians because Paul reads 15:6 incorrectly just as do the NRS translators 2400 years later⁵ when he quotes the Septuagint's version of 15:6. The Septuagint translators added a subject pronoun ("it") making it unclear who was counting what to whom.

This verse, then, reveals that Abram viewed God's promise as righteous, i.e., a faithful act of God. In other words, this famous verse is about God's faithfulness, not Abram's faith.

Now, let's move to the second question, the antecedent of 'it'.

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

To what does it (in red) refer? The answer requires a small bit of Hebrew grammar. Like many other languages (but unlike English), Hebrew is inflected for gender. So, for example, in Hebrew nouns (and other parts of speech) are either male, female, or both. In this verse, the pronoun in question is feminine and so must refer to a feminine noun.

However, the only feminine noun in this verse is 'righteousness' which makes no sense when substituted for its pronoun:

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

On the other hand, we read in the first clause that Abram believed what God had promised. Put another way, the first clause of 15:6 tells us that Abram believed that God told him the truth about what would be the number of his descendants. In Hebrew the word for truth (אֱמֶת (*emet*)) is feminine and so fits perfectly with the context and grammar of the

⁴ Because Abram is the antecedent of the pronoun 'he' – colored red.

⁵ More specifically, in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 Paul cites the Septuagint version of 15:6 which makes the same mistake as the NRS's translators.

verse:

"And he believed in the LORD and counted [the truth of God's promise] to him as righteousness."

Thus, insofar as this verse is concerned, it says nothing about justification of Abram because of Abram's faith.