

Abraham Believed God and the Object of Saving Faith

A Study of Four Passages on Saving Faith

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Three times in the New Testament (Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23) it tells us that “Abraham believed God” or in some translations “Abraham believed in God.” The full text of the three passages in question (in the ESV) are:

- “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” (Rom 4:3)
- “... just as Abraham ‘believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’”? (Gal 3:6)
- “‘Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness’ (adding, “... and he was called a friend of God.” (Jam 2:23)

In each case, the wording is taken from the Septuagint (LXX) of Genesis 15:6 which reads,

- “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Gen 15:6)

ì	é í		μ	ϕ	ϕ	ì	é í	ù ϕ	ì	ύ	(Gen 15:6 LXX)
	é í	è	À àμ	ϕ	ϕ	ì	é í	ù ϕ	ì	ύ	Rom 4:3
ò	é í	↔	À àμ	ϕ	ϕ	ì	é í	ù ϕ	ì	ύ	Gal 3:6
		è	À àμ	ϕ	ϕ	ì	é í	ù ϕ	ì	ύ	Jam 2:23

Studies on this text usually revolve around two issues. The first seizes on the word *episteusev* (a form of *piste*), the word for faith. Thus, they contrast works and faith. Both James and Paul have this in mind in all of their citations. The other focuses on the words *elogisth* (a form of *logizomai*), the word for “reckon” and *dikaisyn n* (a form of *dikaiosyun*), the word for “righteousness.” Thus, they focus in on the meaning of justification. This is clearly in the background for the biblical authors as well, but also in many Protestant studies of the passage.

What is often not considered is the object of Abraham’s faith. Such a study would focus on the meaning of “*to the* ” (the dative form of *theos*¹) the words “The God.” The reason for the lack of analysis here seems to be that it is obvious: Abraham believed God. The problem is, Christians (and the OT as shall see) can speak of God in one of two ways. We are Trinitarians. Thus, we can speak of God as One Being or Essence. This, I presume, is default view of interpreting this phrase. Abraham believed in the One Being called God. But he did not believe Christ. How could that even be?

¹ *T the* is in the dative case. To say “Abraham believed God” would be to take it as a dative of indirect object. To take it as “Abraham believed in God” would be a locative dative, or the dative of sphere or location where something happens. Either way, it is not that relevant to our discussion.

However, we can also speak of God as one of Three Persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. Of course, to speak this way presupposes the Oneness of God, and as such does not in any way detract or contradict the former way of speaking. But this second approach is more specific. The NT speaks in this second more specific way on many occasions. For example, using most of the words found in our four passages, the Apostle talks about, “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom 3:22). We find that the object of faith is Jesus Christ explicitly stated in many other NT passages (Acts 20:21; 24:24; Rom 1:8; Gal 3:22; Php 3:9; Col 1:4; 2:5; 1Ti 1:14; 2Ti 1:13; Jam 2:1; etc.).

The problem is, using Genesis 15:6 as the central proof text for faith, but then turning around and saying that NT faith has as its object Jesus Christ would only make sense if Jesus Christ was the object of faith in the OT as well. Otherwise, it is a total abuse of the OT passage(s). Knowing this must be true in some way, what usually happens is that the object of faith in the OT turns out to be *the promises about the coming* of the Lord Jesus Christ. The *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Romans* speaks for many when it says, “In the Hebrew what is spoken of is *the faith* which Abraham placed in the divine promise of a numerous posterity ... Abraham’s faith had reference to the divine *promise*.”² It then calls “unsatisfactory” the view that would see “a virtual parallel” (Tholuck) in the OT with the object of the justifying faith of Christians because it would have to “add the specific object (Christ) in order to make it work.”³

Surely, it is not wrong to see people in the OT believing in the promises of Christ to come. Both Anna (Luke 2:38) and Simeon (Luke 2:25) at Jesus birth demonstrate this clearly. In fact, it becomes the focus of Paul later in Romans 4 after the first of our three NT citations is given. “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void” (Rom 4:13-14). So yes, there is no question but that Abraham and other OT believers had true faith in the promises of Christ to come. Though, we can question how clearly they understood these promises.

However, and this is a point Paul will make in Galatians as well, notice that it says that the promise was given to Abraham and his offspring (seed). It was given to both. The Apostle is more clear in Galatians 3:16, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.” If this is speaking about the time when the promises were given, then it presupposes that two people were there to receive those promises when they were given. As we will see, this is exactly what was the case. Two people were present at the giving of the promise, and one of them was in fact Christ.

Before we get to that, we want to note that in Paul’s second use of this passage, his focus begins explicitly with faith *in Christ*. “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.” This is the same thing that we saw in the citation of Romans 3:22 above. In both of his citations, what is presupposed for NT Christians is that their faith is in Christ. It is only after this that the quotation is given. In

² Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-Book to the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. John C. Moore, Edwin Johnson, and William P. Dickson (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), 156.

³ Meyer, 156.

Galatians is it merely five verses later. Galatians and James both have the idea of works vs. faith central in their thinking. But even James presupposes that faith is in Christ (see James 2:1). So where do they get this idea?

Again, the passage from the OT is Genesis 15:6. That passage begins in a very strange way, “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision” (15:1). Notice carefully. The word came in a vision. Jewish paraphrases of Scripture called Targums were circulating at the time of the NT. They are clear that they believed there was a Person here called “the Word.” The Targums were written in Aramaic, and the Aramaic equivalent of “word” is Memra. Thus, “After these things the word (*pithgama*) of the Lord came to Abram in prophecy, saying, Fear not, Abram: My Word (*Memra*) shall be thy strength, and thy exceeding great reward.”

It is well known that the Memra is the same idea as John’s famous *Logos* (and John did not invent that idea). Many times it is the *Logos*-Word who comes and speaks to people in the OT, though in this particular case, a different Greek word is used. Nevertheless, the passage is pregnant with some kind of an embodied Person coming to Abraham.

In Genesis 15, this Person is visible. He also speaks in the first person, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen 15:1). He can be spoken back to (vs. 2). The Word can “come to” Abraham (vs. 4) and then “bring him outside” (vs. 5) and talk to him and show him the stars. Remarkably, he can say, “I am Yahweh...” (vs. 7) who brought you out of Ur. He can give promises to him (vs. 1, 4, 5, 13, 14). He can covenant with Abraham (18). And he can pass through the pieces of an animal sacrifice (17). This is because there is a particular Person here with Abraham called The Word.

This “Word” is John’s *Logos*. He is usually called the Angel of the LORD throughout Genesis. In one very important passage for our purposes, Jacob identifies this person as, “The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day, the angel who has redeemed me from all evil” (Gen 48:15-16). Notice how “God” (*elohim*), “God” and “angel” are in parallel construction. The Angel of the LORD *is* God. Hagar says the same thing. When “the Angel of the LORD” comes to her (Gen 16:7, 9, 10, 11) she replies in return to him, “You are a God of seeing” (Gen 16:13). In Genesis 21:17 he is called “The Angel of God (*Elohim*)” rather than “The Angel of the LORD (*Yahweh*).” Same thing in Genesis 31:11.

Much more could be said to demonstrate that Abraham is seeing a Person of the Godhead, that this Person truly belongs to the Godhead, and that He is distinct from other Persons of the Godhead (see Gen 19:24; 24:40; etc.). But the NT puts this in terms that are very familiar to us. This person talking to Abraham was Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus himself said so, “Your father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad” (John 8:56). It isn’t merely that he was looking forward to it, but that he saw it—past tense.

There is a reason that the NT says our faith must be in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was the object of faith in the OT. What we are saying, then, is that when Genesis 15:6 is read in its own context—that is, when it says that “Abraham believed God”—it has a very specific Person in

mind. Abraham believed that Person who was right in front of him. That Person was the Second Person of the Trinity—not yet human flesh—but nevertheless there and talking to him.

What is particularly amazing is that this Person is delivering messages (the function of angels) in the form of promises. He is speaking on behalf of the Father and the other Two Persons of the Trinity when he promises that Abraham will have a Seed. What that means is that even though he is delivering the promise-message, he is speaking them not only to Abraham, but as the Apostle says, to Christ—that is to Himself. He is present not only speaking, but also listening to the promises and having those promises be delivered to Himself. This is an astounding thought.

The conclusion of this brief study is simply that when we think of the object of the faith of Abraham, and when we think of that object being “God” as it says, we are to think first of the Person to whom Abraham is speaking and hearing messages of the future, promises to be believed. Then through faith in his person, there is real faith in God (One in Three). It is not merely that Abraham and other OT saints believed *in promises* of Christ. It is that, but it is more than that. They also believed *Christ*. That is what the text says. It does not literally say, “And Abraham believed the promises of God.” It does not say, “And Abraham believed *in* the promises of God.” It says, “Abraham believed God,” and THIS was credited to him as righteousness.

This God was the Lord Jesus Christ in his preincarnate, angelic form delivering messages of the future that he himself would take on human flesh, die for sin, be raised to new life, and ascend to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father. He knew this all along. Abraham may or may not have understood this, but he did believe Christ when he told him. This IS “the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Including Abraham.

For before he was circumcised the following statement was made regarding him: ‘Abraham believed God, and it was accounted unto him for righteousness.’⁷ And we, therefore, in the uncircumcision of our

⁷ Gen. 15:6.

flesh, believing God through Christ, and having that circumcision which is of advantage to us who have acquired it—namely, that of the heart—we hope to appear righteous before and well-pleasing to God⁴

⁴ Justin Martyr, “Dialogue of Justin with Trypho, a Jew,” in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, vol. 1, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 245.