

WHEN DID ABRAHAM FIRST SAVINGLY BELIEVE?

A List of Sources Compiled by Philip R. Gons

Last Updated 7 April 2007

CONTENTS

SOURCES SUPPORTING THE GENESIS 15 VIEW.....	2
COMMENTARIES	2
Origen	2
OTHER SOURCES.....	2
Walter Eichrodt	2
SOURCES SUPPORTING THE GENESIS 12 VIEW.....	4
STUDY BIBLES.....	4
King James Version Study Bible	4
The MacArthur Study Bible.....	4
COMMENTARIES	5
William Barclay.....	5
John Calvin.....	5
D. A. Carson, et al. (NBC).....	7
Martin Luther	7
Arthur W. Pink.....	8
Allen P. Ross (BKC).....	11
Gordon J. Wenham (WBC).....	11
OTHER SOURCES.....	12
Wilhelmus á Brakel.....	12
O. Palmer Robertson	13
Charles Haddon Spurgeon.....	14
Brian J. Vickers.....	15

SOURCES SUPPORTING THE GENESIS 15 VIEW

COMMENTARIES

Origen

Was Abraham justified just because he had the faith to believe that he would be given a son? Or was it also because of all the other things which he had believed previously? . . . **Before this point, Abraham had believed in part but not perfectly.** Now, however, all the parts of his earlier faith are gathered together to make a perfect whole, by which he is justified.¹

OTHER SOURCES

Walter Eichrodt

The tension between this break-up of the givenness of the nation and the unqualified conviction that Israel had a divine commission *vis-à-vis* the Gentile world was only supportable where the individual's relationship with God was concentrated with unprecedented intensity on the will of the covenant God, and so became capable of the adventure of understanding that, whatever the jeopardy in which external institutions were placed, the setting up of God's kingdom as a religious reality was unassailable. In other words, *the attitude of faith had to emerge as of decisive significance for the God-Man relationship.*

It is therefore no coincidence that *the Elohistic historian*, whose work in other respects also fits into the background of the Elijah period, should have been the one to make *the word of faith the outstanding theme of his patriarchal history.*² What he in his historical situation had experienced as a crucial expression of the individual's relationship with God, he recognized as also the key to the piety in the life of the father of the nation. In *Abraham* therefore he presented his contemporaries with *the type of the faithful*, the man who takes his stand on the promises of God, and who lives by his assurance of God's will, whatever appearances may suggest to the contrary. In the writer's

¹ *Commentarii in Epistulam ad Romanos*, ed. T. Heither (New York: Herder, 1990–95), 2:166–168 cited in Gerald Lewis Bray, ed., “Romans 4:3,” *Romans*, vol. 6, ACCSNT, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 111.

² Gen. 15.6. Cf. H. W. Heidland, *Die Anrechnung des Glaubens zur Gerechtigkeit*, 1936. The view of Gen. 15.6 as a redactional insertion linking the two parts of ch. 15 (T. C. Vriezen, *Geloven en Vertrouwen*, p. 16) seems to me to fail to do justice to the importance of this statement.

powerful symbolism the silent starry heaven points to the illimitable power of the hidden God who manifests himself only in his word, and who in this way elicits the venture of personal trust in which Man gives himself wholly into God's hand.

As the foregoing survey of the rich content of the term 'fear of God' will have shown, there was no need for the Elohist to import any foreign element into Abraham's relationship with God in order to arrive at this interpretation. He simply deepens the exposition of the received tradition by emphasizing as an independent function, of decisive importance for piety, an ingredient in the personal God-Man relationship which other writers had regarded as of no more than subordinate significance. The greatness of the inconceivable God, the marvelous otherness of his nature, is taken just as seriously as it is in the context of the fear of God; but here the affirmation of this greatness in a lively movement of the heart includes *a voluntary surrender of the ego in full awareness of the implications of this decision*, thus bringing to maturity that personal attitude *vis-à-vis* the dynamic of the divine will which was already very much a living reality in the fear of God.

To see in this impressive picture of the decision of faith, as it lays hold of the promise of God, and thus becomes assured of a new way into an unknown land, only adherence to and perseverance in an essential relationship of trust already existing is manifestly to underrate its importance.³ The very use of the distinctive perfect with *waw copulativum* to introduce the movement of faith draws attention to the fact that here a new element is emerging for the first time,⁴ one which cannot be incorporated into a continuum; and the clear connection of faith with God's word of promise, which Abraham encounters at the very point where he is seeking to deviate from the true meaning of his life, gives the conduct of the patriarch still more character of a decisive turning-point in his story. Here a new understanding of God's activity and of his own position is opened up to him. To speak in this context of nothing more than the reinforcement of an earlier faith of Abraham is clearly to mistake the significance of this element in the thematic structure of the historian's work. Abraham makes his decision for affirming the

³ So M. Buber, *Zwei Glaubensweisen*, 1950.

⁴ Cf. the similar passages Josh. 9.12; Judg. 5.26; I Kings 24.14; Isa. 22.14; Gen. 21.25, and on the whole question G. Schrenk, 'Martin Bubers Beurteilung des Paulus in seiner Schrift "Zwei Glaubensweisen"', *Judaica* VIII, 1952, pp. 1ff., and T. C. Vriezen, *Geloven en Vertrouwen*, 1959.

new condition offered him in the promise, and for basing his whole future life on this foundation.⁵

SOURCES SUPPORTING THE GENESIS 12 VIEW

STUDY BIBLES

King James Version Study Bible

15:6. He believed in the LORD: This was not his original act of faith, but a further evidence of his confidence in God. In light of Hebrews 11:8–10, clearly Abram had already experienced saving faith at the time of his original call. Romans 4:6 and 22 cite instances of God imputing righteousness to the account of those who were already believers. Romans 4:18 refers to Abram's believing God's promise that he would have a posterity. Thus, the doctrine of imputation is based upon man's faith. The fact that Abram was justified by God 14 years before he was circumcised is the basis for Paul's argument in Romans 4:9–12 that faith, not works (e.g., circumcision), is the means of our justification. Therefore, the Old Testament as well as the New Testament teaches salvation by faith, not works.⁶

The MacArthur Study Bible

Gen 12:7 I will give this land. Cf. 13:15; 15:18; 17:7, 8; Gal. 3:16. God was dealing with Abram, not in a private promise, but with a view toward high and sacred interests long into the future, i.e., the land which his posterity was to inhabit as a peculiar people. The seeds of divine truth were to be sown there for the benefit of all mankind. It was chosen as the most appropriate land for the coming of divine revelation and salvation for the world. altar to the Lord. By this act, Abram made an open confession of his religion, established worship of the true God, and declared his faith in God's promise. This was the first true place of worship ever erected in the Promised Land. Isaac would later build an altar also to commemorate the Lord's appearance to him (26:24, 25), and Jacob also built one in Shechem (33:18–20).⁷

⁵ Walter Eichrodt, "The Fundamental Forms of Man's Personal Relationship with God," *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, Old Testament Library, trans. J. A. Barker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 277–79.

⁶ "Genesis 15:6," *King James Version Study Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Gen 15:6.

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., ed., "Genesis 12:7," *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word, 1997), Gen 12:7.

COMMENTARIES

William Barclay

When Paul began to speak about Abraham, he was on ground that every Jew knew and understood. In their thoughts Abraham held a unique position. He was the founder of the nation. He was the man to whom God had first spoken. He was the man who had in a unique way had been chosen by God and who had heard and obeyed him. The Rabbis had their own discussions about Abraham. To Paul the essence of his greatness was this. God had come to Abraham and bidden him leave home and friends and kindred and livelihood, and had said to him, "If you make this great venture of faith, you will become the father of a great nation." Thereupon Abraham had taken God at his word. He had not argued; he had not hesitated; he went out not knowing where he was to go (Hebrews 11:8). **It was not the fact that Abraham had meticulously performed the demands of the law that put him into his special relationship with God, it was his complete trust in God and his complete willingness to abandon his life to him. That for Paul was faith, and it was Abraham's faith which made God regard him as a good man.**⁸

John Calvin

We must now notice the circumstance of *time*. Abram was justified by faith many years after he had been called by God; after he had left his country a voluntary exile, rendering himself a remarkable example of patience and of continence; after he had entirely dedicated himself to sanctity and after he had, by exercising himself in the spiritual and external service of God, aspired to a life almost angelical. **It therefore follows, that even to the end of life, we are led towards the eternal kingdom of God by the righteousness of faith.** On which point many are too grossly deceived. For they grant, indeed, that the righteousness which is freely bestowed upon sinners and offered to the unworthy is received by faith alone; but **they restrict this to a moment of time**, so that he who at the first obtained justification by faith, may afterwards be justified by good works. By this method, faith is nothing else than the beginning of righteousness, whereas righteousness itself consists in a continual course of works. But they who thus trifle must be altogether insane. For if the angelical uprightness of Abram faithfully cultivated through so many years, in one uniform course, did not prevent him from fleeing to faith, for the sake of obtaining

⁸ William Barclay, "The Faith Which Takes God at His Word," *The Letter to the Romans*, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 63.

righteousness; where upon earth besides will such perfection be found, as may stand in God's sight? Therefore, by a consideration of the time in which this was said to Abram, we certainly gather, that the righteousness of works is not to be substituted for the righteousness of faith, in any such way, that one should perfect what the other has begun; but that **holy men are only justified by faith, as long as they live in the world.** If any one object, that Abram previously believed God, when he followed Him at His call, and committed himself to His direction and guardianship, the solution is ready; that we are not here told when Abram first began to be justified, or to believe in God; **but that in this one place it is declared, or related, how he had been justified through his whole life.** For if Moses had spoken thus immediately on Abram's first vocation, the cavil of which I have spoken would have been more specious; namely, that the righteousness of faith was only *initial* (so to speak) and not perpetual. **But now since after such great progress, he is still said to be justified by faith, it thence easily appears that the saints are justified freely even unto death.** I confess, indeed, that after the faithful are born again by the Spirit of God, the method of justifying differs, in some respect, from the former. For God reconciles to himself those who are born only of the flesh, and who are destitute of all good; and since he finds nothing in them except a dreadful mass of evils, he counts them just, by imputation. But those to whom he has imparted the Spirit of holiness and righteousness, he embraces with his gifts. Nevertheless, in order that their good works may please God, it is necessary that these works themselves should be justified by gratuitous imputation; but some evil is always inherent in them. Meanwhile, however, this is a settled point, that men are justified before God by believing not by working; while they obtain grace by faith, because they are unable to deserve a reward by works. Paul also, in hence contending, that Abram did not merit by works the righteousness which he had received before his circumcision, does not impugn the above doctrine. The argument of Paul is of this kind: The circumcision of Abram was posterior to his justification in the order of time, and therefore could not be its cause, for of necessity the cause precedes its effect. I also grant, that Paul, for this reason, contends that works are not meritorious, except under the covenant of the law, of which covenant, circumcision is put as the earnest and the symbol. But since Paul is not here defining the force and nature of circumcision, regarded as a pure and genuine institution of God, but is rather disputing on the sense attached to it, by those with whom he deals, he therefore does not allude to the covenant which God before had made with Abram, because the mention of it was unnecessary for the present purpose. Both arguments are therefore of force; first, that the righteousness of Abram cannot be ascribed

to the covenant of the law, because it preceded his circumcision; and, secondly, that **the righteousness even of the most perfect characters perpetually consists in faith**; since Abram, with all the excellency of his virtues, after his daily and even remarkable service of God, was, nevertheless, justified by faith. For this also is, in the last place, worthy of observation, that what is here related concerning one man, is applicable to all the sons of God. For since he was called the father of the faithful, not without reason; and since further, there is but one method of obtaining salvation; Paul properly teaches, that a real and not personal righteousness is in this place described.⁹

D. A. Carson, et al. (NBC)

Abram accepted God's reassurance, he *believed the LORD* (6). **The verbal form suggests an ongoing activity, i.e. he kept believing the promise, he kept relying on the Lord.** So God *credited it to him as righteousness*. Righteousness is that state of acceptance by God which comes from perfect obedience to the law. Abram's failure to fulfil the law's demands completely is obvious in Genesis, yet his faith in God's promise of a child is here said to count as righteousness. For Paul, this shows that faith, not works, is the prerequisite to acceptance by God (Gal. 3:6–14). Jas. 2:18–24 and Heb. 11:8–9 point out that Abraham's faith was proved genuine by his good works. This 'faith that works' is central to the Christian understanding of salvation and upright living.¹⁰

Martin Luther

In conformity with this fundamental principle, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews learnedly includes the deeds of all the saints in faith and maintains that everything was done by them out of faith. "For without faith it is impossible to please Him" (Heb. 11:6); and the very fact that God promises something demands that we believe it, that is, that we conclude by faith that it is true and have no doubt that the outcome will be in agreement with the promise.

Therefore if you should ask whether Abraham was righteous before this time, my answer is: He was righteous because he believed God. But here the Holy Spirit wanted to attest this expressly, since the promise deals with a spiritual Seed. He did so in order that you might conclude on the

⁹ John Calvin, "Genesis 15:6," *Genesis*, Calvin's Commentaries, [Gen 15:6](#).

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, and G. J. Wenham, eds., "15:1–21 The Covenant Promise," *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), [Gen 15:1](#).

basis of a correct inference that those who accept this Seed, or those who believe in Christ, are righteous.

Abraham's faith was extraordinary, since he left his country when commanded to do so and became an exile; but we are not all commanded to do the same thing. Therefore in that connection Moses does not add: "Abraham believed God, and this was reckoned to him as righteousness." But in the passage before us he makes this addition when he is speaking about the heavenly Seed. He does so in order to comfort the church of all times. He is saying that those who, with Abraham, believe this promise are truly righteous.

Here, in the most appropriate place, the Holy Spirit wanted to set forth expressly and clearly the statement that righteousness is nothing else than believing God when He makes a promise.¹¹

Arthur W. Pink

Genesis 15:6: Just here we would pause to consider what seems to have proven a real difficulty to expositors and commentators. Was not Abram a "believer" years before the point of time contemplated in Genesis 15:6? Not a few have suggested that prior to this incident Abram was in a condition similar to that of Cornelius before Peter preached to him. **But are we not expressly told that it was "By faith" (Heb. 11:8) he had left Ur of the Chaldees and went out "not knowing whither he went!"** Yet why are we *here* told that "he believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness?" Surely the answer is not far to seek. **It is true that in the New Testament the Holy Spirit informs us that Abram was a believer when he left Chaldea,** but his faith is *not there* (i.e., Heb. 11:8) mentioned in *connection with his justification*. Instead, in the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians the incident which the Holy Spirit singles out as the occasion when Abram's faith was counted for righteousness is the one in Genesis 15 now before us. And why? Because in Genesis 15 Abram's faith is directly connected with God's promise respecting his "seed," which "seed" was *Christ* (see Gal. 3:16)! The faith which was "*counted for righteousness*" was the faith which believed what God had said concerning the promised Seed. **It was this instance of Abram's faith which the Holy Spirit was pleased to select as the model for believing unto justification.** There is no justification apart from Christ—"Through this Man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins. And by Him all that *believe* are *justified* from all things" (Acts

¹¹ Martin Luther, "[Genesis 15:6](#)," *Lectures on Genesis: Chapters 15–20*, vol. 3, *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, trans. George V. Schick (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1961), [3:19–20](#).

13:38, 39). Therefore we say it was not that Abram here “believed God” for the first time, but that here God was pleased to *openly attest his righteousness* for the first time, and that for the reason stated above. Though Christians may believe God with respect to the common concerns of this life, such faith, while it evidences they have been justified is not the faith by which they were justified—the faith which justifies has to do directly with the person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. This was the character of Abram’s faith in Genesis 15; he believed the promise of God *which pointed to Christ*. Hence it is in Genesis 15 and not in Genesis 12 we read, “And He counted it to him for righteousness.” How perfect are the ways of God!¹²

Hebrews 11:8: The individual, internal, and invincible call of God is an act of sovereign grace, accompanied by all-mighty power, quickening those who are dead in trespasses and sins, imparting to them spiritual life. This Divine call is regeneration, or the new birth, when its favored recipient is brought “out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). Now this is what is before us in Hebrews 11:8, which gives additional proof that this verse commences a new section of the chapter. The wondrous call which Abraham received from God is necessarily placed at the head of the Spirit’s detailed description of the life of faith; necessarily, we say, for faith itself is utterly impossible until the soul has been Divinely quickened.

Let us first contemplate the state that Abraham was in until and at the time God called him. To view him in his unregenerate condition is a duty which the Holy Spirit pressed upon Israel of old: “Look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged: look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you” (Isa. 51:1, 2). Help is afforded if we turn to Joshua 24:2, “Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods.” Abraham, then, belonged to a heathen family, and dwelt in a great city, until he was

¹² Arthur Walkington Pink, “Abraham’s Vision,” *Gleanings in Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2005), 167–68. This is difficult to follow. It’s clear that Pink regarded Abraham as a believer in Genesis 12. Elsewhere (in his [comments on Heb 11:8](#)) he affirms that Abraham was regenerate and converted at this point. But was he justified? I’m not entirely sure what Pink would say to that. He may simply be saying that, though Abraham was justified by Genesis 12, the Spirit didn’t testify openly to his justification until Gen 15 when his faith was explicitly tied to the Seed. Or he might be saying that Abraham was regenerated in Genesis 12 but not justified until Genesis 15—a position that poses some serious problems. Regardless, Pink sees Abraham as saved in some sense by Genesis 12. His point regarding the promise in Genesis 15 being an explicit reference to the Seed in whom Abraham then put his faith seems unwarranted and exegetically unsound.

seventy. No doubt he lived his life after the same manner as his fellows—content with the “husks” which the swine feed upon, with little or no serious thoughts of the Hereafter. Thus it is with each of God’s elect till the Divine call comes to them and arrests them in their self-will, mad, and destructive course.

“The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran” (Acts 7:2). What marvelous grace! The God of glory condescended to draw near and reveal Himself unto one that was sunk in sin, immersed in idolatry, having no concern for the Divine honor. There was nothing in Abraham to deserve God’s notice, still less to merit His esteem. But more: not only was the grace of God here signally evident, but the sovereignty of His grace was displayed in thus singling him out from the midst of all his fellows. . . .

“The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham” (Acts 7:2). All that is included in these words, we know not; as to how God “appeared” unto him, we cannot say. But of two things we may be certain: for the first time in Abraham’s life God became a living Reality to him; further, he perceived that He was an all-glorious Being.

. . .

As we have pointed out above, God’s appearing to Abraham and his call of him, speaks to us of that miracle of grace which takes place in the soul at regeneration. Now the evidence of regeneration is found in a genuine conversion: it is that complete break from the old life, both inner and outer, which furnishes proof of the new birth.

. . .

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.” This verse, read in the light of Genesis 12:1, clearly signifies that God demanded the supreme place in Abraham’s affections. His life was no longer to be regulated by self-will, self-love, self-pleasing; self was to be entirely set aside, “crucified.” Henceforth, the will and word of God was to govern and direct him in all things. Henceforth he was to be a man without a home on earth, but seeking one in Heaven, and treading that path which alone leads thither.

. . .

But such an obedience as God requires can only proceed from a supernatural faith. An unshakable confidence in the living God, and unreserved surrender to His holy will, each step of

our lives being ordered by His word (Psalm 119:105), can only issue from a miraculous work of grace which He has Himself wrought in the heart.¹³

Allen P. Ross (BKC)

Genesis 15:6 provides an important note, but it does not pinpoint Abram's conversion. That occurred years earlier when he left Ur. (The form of the Heb. word for "believed" shows that his faith did *not* begin after the events recorded in vv. 1–5.) Abram's faith is recorded here because it is foundational for making the covenant. **The Abrahamic Covenant did not give Abram redemption; it was a covenant made with Abram who had already believed and to whom righteousness had already been imputed.** The Bible clearly teaches that in all ages imputed righteousness (i.e., salvation) comes by faith.¹⁴

Gordon J. Wenham (WBC)

Waw consec + 3 masc. sg pf hiph וַיִּשְׁמַע. **It is unusual for single events in past time to use pf + waw: impf. + waw is usual (Joüon, 192). It may indicate repeated action in the past, "he kept on believing" (GKC, 112ss).**¹⁵

6 The editorial comment with which the first scene closes (cf. 2:24) points out that Abram's silence showed his faith in the promises just made to him (vv 4–5). Without this remark, an element of ambiguity would have surrounded Abram's reaction: indeed, then his question in v 8 could have been taken as an expression of doubt. **The verbal form וַיִּשְׁמַע [sic] (waw + perfect) "he believed" probably indicates repeated or continuing action. Faith was Abram's normal response to the LORD's words.**

...

There appear to be two reasons why Abram's faith should be noted here: (1) because the word of promise had come to him in a crisis situation following the battle of chap. 14, and (2) **it serves as**

¹³ Arthur Walkington Pink, "The Call of Abraham," *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Swengel, PA: Bible Truth Depot, 1954), 676–83. This piece makes it clear that Pink regarded Abraham as regenerate, converted, and having faith at Genesis 12.

¹⁴ Allen P. Ross, "Genesis," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983–85), 1:55.

¹⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 324.

a reminder of Abram's attitude to God, which should be a model for all his descendants to follow.¹⁶

“And he believed in the Lord.” The verbal form implies continued repeated acts of faith. The significance of the phrase does not lie here, though, nor in the existence of his faith as such, for the OT everywhere presupposes that men ought to exercise faith in God; faith means believing his promises or obeying his commands as the situation dictates. What is unusual is that the writer saw fit to draw attention to Abram's faith: if all men of the old covenant were expected to be men of faith, why mention it here? Possibly it was because of the staggering nature of the promise made to an old man, though in the light of the earlier somewhat vaguer promises along the same lines, this does not seem an entirely adequate explanation. More likely, there is an element of paradigm here. Abram is a model for all his descendants to imitate: whatever their circumstances, they must have faith in God.¹⁷

OTHER SOURCES

Wilhelmus á Brakel

This proof we formulate on the basis of such texts in which it is declared that justification follows the exercise of faith. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1); “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith” (Rom. 3:28). Faith must not be exercised once and for all, but it is the duty and task of believers to exercise faith daily, and to receive Jesus daily as the ransom for their sins, unto their justification. Would faith only be efficacious when first exercised and not subsequently? No, faith is always of the same efficacy. Since justification is the fruit of faith when first exercised, justification is also the fruit when faith is exercised by renewal. This we observe for example in Abraham. Abraham was already a believer and had long before been justified prior to the promise in Genesis 15 being given to him, namely, “So shall thy seed be” (vs. 5). It is nevertheless stated in verse 6, “And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness.” Paul had this in mind in Romans 4. It was the apostle's objective to prove that man is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith. This he proves by quoting Genesis

¹⁶ Ibid., 329.

¹⁷ Ibid., 334.

15:6, where he uses Abraham as an example, demonstrating that Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith. “For what saith the Scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). **Abraham was already justified prior to this; nevertheless, when subsequently he believed again, he was again justified.** Paul uses this justification as a proof that man is justified by faith rather than the law. Therefore, as often as a believer exercises faith, so frequently is he justified.¹⁸

O. Palmer Robertson

In addition to the basic exegetical concerns of this passage, probings into broader theological dimensions lead to a fuller appreciation of the significance of the text. Notice in particular:

1. The time of Abraham’s “justification”

This particular question has played a significant role in the history of the exegesis of Genesis 15:6. The time of Abraham’s “justification” was a matter of first importance to the Apostle Paul. This question also occupied John Calvin at the time of the Reformation in his explanation of the relative roles of faith and works in justification.

The selection of this particular time as the juncture at which Abraham was declared righteous indicates that a life of obedience never functions as the way to right-standing with God. The life of the patriarch had been “spiritual and almost angelic.”¹⁹ He had achieved essentially all that could be expected of the pious in this life. Yet after so much in terms of commendable actions, it is his faith that is accounted to him for righteousness.

The fact that this declaration concerning the faith and resulting righteousness of Abraham comes at this particular juncture does not imply that now for the first time he believes and his faith is

¹⁸ Wilhelmus á Brakel, “Justification,” *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 2:388. I’m not convinced that Brakel’s way of speaking is accurate or most helpful when he says that justification is repeated as often as we believe. I’m more comfortable with Calvin’s way of saying that we continue to be considered or reckoned righteousness by faith even after we are first justified (though Calvin himself possible spoke of continual justification [*ICR*, III, xiv, 11, esp. n. D82], as did Luther [*LW*, 34:167, 191]). In other words, it is *always* by faith that we are righteous and not just as the beginning of our salvation.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by Henry Beveridge. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957, III, xi, 14.

reckoned to him for righteousness. To the contrary, he continues in a state of faith and its resulting righteousness. But the placing of this declaration of righteousness at this juncture of the patriarch's life underscores the fact that nothing has been added to faith as the way to righteousness. If this announcement had been placed at the beginning of the account of his life, it could have been proposed that the accounting of faith as righteousness related only to the patriarch's initial experience of the divine declaration of justification. In this case, it might be supposed that subsequently the decision to justify might come as a consequence of obedience. It then might have been argued that the righteousness of faith in contrast with a righteousness by the way of obedience was only initial and not perpetual. As John Calvin summarizes his argument:

But now, since after such great progress, he is still said to be justified by faith, it thence easily appears that the saints are justified freely even unto death.²⁰

While the reformer's remarks are set in an intensely polemical circumstance, they nonetheless are exegetically accurate. God reckons faith to serve in the stead of righteous deeds as the way to justification long after the patriarch's exemplary life had begun. Only faith, and not also righteous deeds, was reckoned to him for righteousness.²¹

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

When he was comforted, Abram received an open declaration of his justification. I take it, beloved friends, that our text does not intend to teach us that Abram was not justified before this time. Faith always justifies whenever it exists, and as soon as it is exercised; its result follows immediately, and is not an aftergrowth needing months of delay. The moment a man truly trusts his God he is justified. Yet many are justified who do not know their happy condition; to whom as yet the blessing of justification has not been opened up in its excellency and abundance of privilege. There may be some of you here today who have been called by grace from darkness into marvelous light; you have been led to look to Jesus, and you believe you have received pardon of your sin, and yet, for want of knowledge, you know little of the sweet meaning of such

¹⁴John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d., p. 409.

²¹O. Palmer Robertson, "Genesis 15:6: New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text," *WTJ* 42:2 (Spring 1980): 266–67.

words as these, “Accepted in the Beloved,” “Perfect in Christ Jesus,” “Complete in him.” You *are* doubtless justified, though you scarcely understand what justification means; and you are accepted, though you have not realized your acceptance; and you are complete in Jesus Christ, though you have today a far deeper sense of your personal incompleteness than of the all-sufficiency of Jesus. A man may be entitled to property though he cannot read the title-deeds, or has not as yet heard of their existence; the law recognizes right and fact, not our apprehension thereof. But there will come a time, beloved, when you who are called will clearly realize your justification, and will rejoice in it; it shall be intelligently understood by you, and shall become a matter of transporting delight, lifting you to a higher platform of experience, and enabling you to walk with a firmer step, sing with a merrier voice, and triumph with an enlarged heart.²²

Brian J. Vickers

When Paul chooses to include Abraham in Romans, he is not simply using a handy example that just happens to support his argument, nor does he merely use Genesis 15:6 as a proof text.²³

While Genesis 15:6 is not, as we will see, the first time Abraham believed, and subsequently not the time of his, so to speak, conversion,²⁴ it is a pivotal moment in the biblical narrative. This text is not at all divorced from soteriological issues, for it is a central text in the midst of the account of a vital era in the unfolding of the history of salvation. It is also a programmatic text that establishes a constant principle: the people of God, those with whom God initiates and establishes a relationship (i.e., a covenant), will relate to God by faith. They must believe in God, and their faith, apart from anything else, unites them to God—the very object of their faith. On the basis of this faith, they are reckoned righteous. For Abraham, it was faith in the promises of

²² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Justification by Faith—Illustrated by Abram’s Righteousness,” vol. 14, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Sermons* (Albany, OR: Ages Software, 1998).

²³ The name “Abraham” will be used throughout for the sake of convenience (except when direct quotes and references to specific events require otherwise). I recognize that in most of the cited texts his name was still “Abram.”

²⁴ Although this is similar to comments made by N. T. Wright in *What St. Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 118–19, 125, 133, I am not arguing that this text is not about salvation, [sic] I am simply saying that neither Moses nor Paul are focusing on when Abraham believed [sic] i.e., his conversion. This seems like a simple enough observation.

God; for Paul and his readers, it is faith specifically in Christ—who is the fulfillment of all God’s promises.²⁵

In chapter 12 God addresses Abraham directly, telling him to leave Haran and travel to a new land (12:1). Following this command are God’s promises:

And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse the one who curses you; and through you all the nations of the earth will be blessed. (12:2–3)

This call and pronouncement from God to Abraham is significant because it ushers in a new era in redemptive history. Dumbrell captures this idea when he says “we must not lose sight of the fact that the call of Abraham in this passage is a redemptive response to the human dilemma which the spread-of-sin narratives of 3–11 have posed.”²⁶ **Secondly, it is clear that well before the narrative reaches chapter 15, a relationship that includes the elements of promise, condition, and response between God and Abraham is firmly established prior to the covenant ceremony (15:7–18).**²⁷

²⁵ Brian J. Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 72–73.

²⁶ W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation* (Carlisle, Scotland: Paternoster, 1997) [sic] 47.

²⁷ In *Covenant and Creation*, Dumbrell stresses this point in regard to Genesis 15 in several places, e.g., 47, 49, 54–56. Dumbrell is concerned to show that covenants are established, not out of the blue, but in the context of pre-existing relationships. Dumbrell’s argument that the major biblical covenants stem ultimately from an existing antediluvian covenant with creation is strongly opposed by Paul R. Williamson (“Covenant,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003], 141–43). Williamson’s main argument is that the text does not say that a covenant is established anytime before the covenant with Noah in Genesis 6:18; 9:8–17. One does not, however, have to accept Dumbrell’s conception of an antediluvian covenant to agree that a covenant is based on a relationship that already exists. In regard to the issue of covenant in general, the position taken in this work, though it will not come up until Chapter 3, is that a covenant relationship did indeed exist between God and Adam, and that every subsequent, major covenant is a step in the history of redemption to restore and recreate that original relationship between God and man. Even if one is disinclined toward a covenant in Genesis 1–3, it seems difficult to avoid at least saying that the relationship was “covenant-like.” In this sense one might say that covenants are technically redemptive with the instrumental purpose of fulfilling God’s will for his creation as first revealed in Genesis 1–3. Williamson, though critical of Dumbrell, nevertheless says that the Noahic covenant contains “clear echoes of the creation narrative . . . [and] suggests merely that God intended, through Noah, to fulfill his original creative intent: they do not necessarily presuppose the

God called Abraham and certain promises accompanied that call. Abraham responded by packing up his wife, family, and possessions and setting out for Canaan (12:4–6). In 12:7, God appends a specific promise of the land to Abraham’s descendants, and then on a mountain east of Bethel and west of Ai, Abraham responds to God by building an altar and calling on “the name of the Lord” (12:8). **Abraham’s obedient actions are those of a man who believes what God promised. If Abraham did not believe God’s promises, there is no conceivable explanation for his departure from his homeland or of his personal worship of God. Abraham trusted God to do as he promised, and his trust is evident through his actions.**

Several events take place in the narrative between 11:9 and 15:1, including a clear example of Abraham’s weakness (12:10–20), the division of the land with Lot (13:1–13), Abraham’s defeat of the kings and the rescue of Lot (14:1–16), and the meeting with and subsequent blessing from Melchizedek (14:17–19). The event that takes place after the division of the land with Lot is worth a special note. God again appears to Abraham, telling him to look in all directions as far as he can see, and promises to give him all the land he sees (13:14–15). Building upon the promises of 12:2 and 12:7, God promises to make the number of Abraham’s descendants “as the dust of the earth” (13:16). God then commands Abraham to travel through the land which he is giving him (13:17). Abraham moves through the land and after arriving at Hebron he responds to God in worship (13:18). **At each point in the narrative when God appears to Abraham and confirms and further defines the original promise given in 12:2–3 (12:7; 13:14–17), Abraham responds positively to God, just as he did in 12:4–6 (12:8–9; 13:18). Thus, from the moment God called him, though not confirmed explicitly in the text, Abraham’s faith in God is evident. His obedience is evidence of his faith. “By faith,” as the writer to the Hebrews says, “Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance, and he went out not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8).²⁸**

The aspect of **וַיִּשְׁמַע** in Genesis 15:6 is worth attention because the issue of when Abraham believed and why his belief is reported at this point in the narrative is an important consideration in the discussion of this text. The form (*waw* + hiphil perfect) may suggest that this is not only a comment that relates to Abraham’s response at that particular time, but is characteristic of

existence of a covenant between God and inanimate creation or indicate that the material in Gen[esis] 1–2 must be understood redemptively” (“Covenant,” 143).

²⁸ Brian J. Vickers, *Jesus’ Blood and Righteousness: Paul’s Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 74–75.

Abraham's relationship with God in general. By choosing this construction (the aspect of *waw* + hiphil perfect is imperfective), the narrator could be drawing attention away from a specific temporal aspect to a more undefined, less time-connected action. The narrator is asserting not only that Abraham believed God's promise in 15:4–5, but that believing, or faith, was his “normal response to the Lord's word.”²⁹ It is, moreover, a response based on a prior, established relationship.³⁰

Simply put, this is not the first time Abraham believed God. The Septuagint translator's choice of a simple aorist (ἐπίστευσεν) is in keeping with this interpretation (or at least does not argue against it).³¹ It is not surprising that the translator chose an aorist since it is the “default” tense, and does not add particular emphasis on the temporal nature of Abraham's belief in Genesis

²⁹ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1–17*, WBC, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 329. Wenham points out that it is unusual to indicate single events in past time with perfect + *waw*. Imperfect + *waw* consecutive is the more likely construction (ibid. [sic] 324). For discussion of the construction, see *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed. E. Kautzsch 2nd ed., ed. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 330–39; Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. and ed. T. Muraoka, *Subsidia Biblica* 14/2 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991; reprint 1996), 404. Both Gesenius and Joüon list Genesis 15:6 as an unusual occurrence. For a more detailed discussion of the imperfective aspect of biblical Hebrew verbs, particularly in narrative literature, see Peter J. Gentry, “The System of the Finite Verb in Classical Biblical Hebrew,” *Hebrew Studies* 39 (1998): 13–20.

³⁰ Perhaps this is the reason that Abraham's faith is not mentioned directly until Genesis 15. Abraham believed God when he left his home in Haran, but in the narrative an explicit statement regarding Abraham's faith is not mentioned until after the relationship between God and Abraham is firmly established in the text.

³¹ This observation is based on the idea that the [sic] in terms of verbal aspect, the aorist tense carries the least semantic weight. Moberly agrees with the idea that Genesis 15:6 should be read not as a “new” act on Abraham's part or as a “deeper or truer response” than what is seen in Genesis 12 or in Abraham's response to God's promises in 18:14–17 (“Abraham's Righteousness,” 118). However, he is incorrect to say that the ongoing sense of the Hebrew of Genesis 15:6 is “lost in the Septuagint” since an aorist rather than an imperfect is selected to translate וְהִיאָּמֵן [sic!]. He also points out that the Septuagint, and presumably its incorrect rendering of וְהִיאָּמֵן with ἐπίστευσεν, is cited three times in the New Testament (ibid. [sic] 105). Moberly's comments seem to rest on the idea that in this text the aorist is punctiliar [sic] in respect to time. That is, the Septuagint translator, by using an aorist, misconstrues the text to mean that only Abraham's faith at that particular point in time is in view. This could be true, but it may here be functioning as a background tense, and thus say little if anything about temporal elements in the text, punctiliar [sic] or otherwise. See Stanley Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood*, vol. 1 of *Studies in Biblical Greek*, ed. D. A. Carson (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 17–65; 163–239; idem, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 20–26, 35–49.

15:6. The Septuagint captures the imperfective aspect of the Hebrew text. The temporal point of Abraham's belief, thought not tossed aside, is not the main focus of this narrative.

Eichrodt levies a strong objection to the idea that Abraham's response of faith in Genesis 15:6 is indicative of and in keeping with a prior relationship.³² He says that to understand this text, "this impressive picture of the decision of faith," as "only adherence to and perseverance in" a prior, established relationship is to "manifestly underrate its importance."³³ Eichrodt, seeking to emphasize the element of "decision" in faith, which is described as "*a voluntary surrender of the ego in full awareness of the implications of this decision,*" isolates the text from the preceding narrative.³⁴ Contrary to most interpreters, he argues that the *waw* + perfect construction of אָמַן is evidence for a temporally confined event, something happening "for the first time."³⁵ He cites texts with similar constructions as support, but these texts are not ultimately persuasive.³⁶

³² Contra Dumbrell (*Covenant and Creation*).

³³ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Old Testament Library, vol. 1, trans. J. A. Barker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 278.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 278 [sic]; his emphasis.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Of the texts Eichrodt cites, only Genesis 21:25 has a verb (יָכַח "reprove") with *waw* + perfect in the hiphil stem. In that text, Abraham "reproves" Abimelech about a well taken by Abimelech's servants. This text does appear to show the use of a construction like that found in 15:6 in the context of a singular event. By itself, however, this text only suggests that this construction can be used in reference to a singular event, or that it is only used *here* in this way, but the imperfective aspect conveyed by the verb can be maintained. Wenham notes the "unusual" grammatical construction in the context of an event in the past, and suggests that it could be indicative of Abraham's complaining more than once, or frequently, to Abimelech in regard to the well. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 17–50*, WBC, vol. 2 (Waco, TX: Word, 1994), 92. In Joshua 9:12 the verb הִיָּח appears as *waw* + qal perfect referring to bread that "has become crumbled." The imperfective aspect is clearer here. Another *waw* + qal perfect appears in Judges 5:26, which speaks of Jael killing Sisera, when she "struck" (הִלֵּם) him in the head with a tent peg. The context itself may rule out any notion of "repeated" action, but on the other hand how many hits does it take to nail a head to the floor with a hammer and a tent peg? More than one, presumably. However, is the point in time really the issue? Whatever the case, the temporal element is certainly not the focus in this text. In Isaiah 22:14, the Lord reveals (גָּלָה, here as *waw* + niphil perfect) himself to Isaiah in regard to the punishment of the people's sin. Again, the emphasis is not on the punctiliar [sic] nature of the event but that the event simply happened. These texts seem to show, to varying degrees, the verbal construction *waw* + perfect used in what might be regarded as "first time" events that "cannot be incorporated into a continuum." On examination, however, the idea of a continuum or a "time" is not emphasized in these texts. Just as imperfective aspect does not argue specifically for "continual" action in regard to time, neither

Though Eichrodt's arguments, particularly from grammar, are not convincing and in spite of his rather existential definition of faith, there is still a sense in which his criticism might help temper the view on the opposite extreme. Just as Eichrodt represents an extreme position in his assertion that the exact moment of "decision" is at the forefront in Genesis 15:6, so also there is a danger of going to the other extreme, i.e., de-emphasizing the moment to the extent that it becomes almost irrelevant that Abraham's faith is mentioned in the narrative. **Neither the recognition that Abraham clearly "believed" before Genesis 15 nor the form of וַאֲבִרָה, should diminish the significance of the pronouncement at this point in the narrative.** That "he believed in the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness" at that specific time should not be diminished. It is not, after all, a matter of no importance that Abraham's faith receives explicit mention at this point in the narrative, coming as it does right before the covenant ceremony. **It is precisely this point, this moment in the narrative, that has significance, even though it is clear that Abraham was already "a believer."**

Thus, in spite of the importance of recognizing that there is a preexisting relationship between God and Abraham before Genesis 15:6, it is not the pre-existing relationship itself of Abraham's actions in the course of that relationship that God reckons as righteousness; it is Abraham's *faith* that the Lord reckons as righteousness. It becomes explicit that the covenant which the Lord makes with Abraham is entered into (on Abraham's part) by faith. The Lord's reckoning of Abraham's faith as righteousness is the entranceway into the covenant. So the narrative of Genesis, centuries before Paul, established that it is not a matter of anything Abraham did, but it was his faith in God, including God's promises, that God reckoned as righteousness. Justification by faith is not original to Paul.³⁷

does the construction argue for a "first time" event. The temporal element is not of particular importance in any of the texts cited by Eichrodt. That is, the "when" of the action is not highlighted in the grammar of the text. It is simply a matter that the events described *happened*, without special emphasis on the *specific time* they occurred. Other factors indicate why Abraham's faith is highlighted at this juncture in the narrative.

³⁷ Brian J. Vickers, *Jesus' Blood and Righteousness: Paul's Theology of Imputation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 78–80.