

Righteousness By Faith: When Abraham Was Cynical and Righteous At The Same Time

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Sola fide, the central doctrine for Martin Luther “by which the church stands or falls,” has deep roots in the Hebrew Bible. Abram “believed in the LORD, and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” (Gen 15:6 NRSV). Over the past five hundred years theologians have debated the doctrine of faith not from the context of Abraham’s story but via Paul’s expositions in Romans 4 where Abraham figures as an illustration that salvation is by faith and not works. The primary concern for Paul in the Letter to the Romans was salvation with faith at its center. In this paper I will go back to the Hebrew roots of *sola fide* and read Genesis 15 from the perspective of dialogue and personal interaction framed into unique narrative structures.

Faith Between Vision and Deep Sleep

Faith in Genesis 15 arises between a vision and deep sleep.

- A “the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision” (v. 1)
- X “He believed” (v. 6)
- A’ “a deep sleep fell on Abram” (v. 12)

This is the first framework for the story of faith in Genesis 15, one that transports Abram from his military exploits on the battlefield into an awesome world of prophetic ecstasy, “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision [*machazeh*]” (Gen 15:1). The context is Abram’s fight against a coalition of Canaanite kings, the rescue of Lot, and the meeting with Melchizedek. Genesis 15 then records the first vision in the Hebrew Bible. The result of the vision is given in a commentary-like statement, “He believed in the LORD and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness” (v. 6).

The base word for Abram’s vision is the Hebrew verb *chazah*, “to see, behold, gaze,” a verb used almost exclusively in poetry or exalted prose texts. The covenantal meal ceremony of the Israelite elders on Mount Sinai conveys the impressiveness of such a vision with the words, “they beheld [*yechezu*] God, and ate and drank” (Exod 24:11). The same verb occurs only two more times in the Pentateuch, namely when Balaam receives oracles of blessing over the Israelite tribes in “the vision [*machazeh*] of the

Almighty” (Num 24:4, 16).¹ The prophet in the Hebrew Bible is a “seer” and “beholder in vision.” In other parts of the Hebrew Bible it is Daniel who stands out as the one who far more than others sees such visions [*chazon*] of incredible and terrifying nature (Dan 1:17; 8:1, 2, 13, 15, 17, 26; 9:21, 24; 10:14; 11:14).

In Gen 15, the vision gives room for things that come as a first in the Abraham narratives. There is a certain openness between Abram and Yahweh that one has not observed in prior encounters. When God first called Abram, *Lech lecha* (“Go!”), he went (Gen 12:1, 4). No question is recorded in the narrative, no verbal reply. But when “the word of the LORD came in a vision,” Abram, reacted verbally, for the first time he broke his silence and talked in the presence of Yahweh. Genesis 15:2–4 records the dialogue and conveys an outburst of emotions from the 85-year old man who has waited for his heir for ten years.² For all those years the divine promise did not come true. It is in the vision that Abram finds his voice and freedom to interact with Yahweh and express his disappointment in an emotional manner.

The counterpart to the vision is when Abram transitions into a deep sleep (*tardemah*, Gen 15:12). It is an abnormal sleep associated with terror and great darkness in the divine presence. The Hebrew Bible tells of such a divinely induced sleep when Yahweh Elohim fashioned woman out of a side of man (*tardemah*, Gen 2:21). The awesomeness of this experience is expressed in poetic euphoria. Abram who had prepared the animals for the covenant ritual then watches in terror the ceremonial enactment. Yet, the formal and structural narration³ of both the vision and the deep sleep states the climax with the words, “He believed in the LORD.” He believed when his soul burst into words and he believed when he gazed silently and terrified how the fire torch passed between the bloody pathway.

Faith Between Present and Past

The second structural frame for the expression of faith in Gen 15 is Yahweh’s self-identification formulae embedded in historical settings of battle victory:

- A “I am a shield for you” (v. 1)
- X “He believed” (v. 6)
- A’ “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans” (v. 7)

¹ Outside the Torah, the word *makhazeh* occurs only one other time in Ezekiel 13:7.

² Abram was 75 when he went out from his family and land (Gen 12:4). He was 86 when Ishmael was born (16:16).

³ Lohfink identified Gen 15 as “nachgeahmte Erzählung,” “imitation narrative.”

The first “I am” speaks of the battle . “I am a shield [*magen*]” is the God “who delivered [*miggen*]” Abram’s enemies into his hands (Gen 14:20). Melchizedek recognized shield-God, the God here and now, Abram did not. In Abram’s battle narrative of Gen 14, God seems absent. Abram and his soldiers fight on their own. Yet, God speaks to the moment, “I AM.” He will do this again with Moses, he will do this in the great “I AM” statements over the millennia.

In contrast God said also, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans.” This goes far back into Abram’s past, as far as his father’s journey out of Ur in Chaldea. It is the standard exodus-formula cited at the top of the Decalogue, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Egypt out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2). For Abram it brings back a memory of the past, maybe long forgotten. It stands as the counterpart to the memory of the fight of the present moment. For faith to grow both parts need to be evoked and contemplated, the ones where one is all alone fighting the battles of life, and the memories of the far past. In both he is “I AM.”

Faith Between Reward and Suffering

Another frame for faith:

A “your reward shall be very great.” (v. 1)

X “He believed” (v. 6)

A’ “your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. . . . As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.” (vv. 13–15)

The linguistic connection between the record about Abram’s refusal to have any part of the spoils of war gained from the Canaanite kings (Gen 14:22–24) and the promise of a very great reward in the vision of Gen 15 speaks to the high honor of Abram before God. He has every reason to look forward for his “reimbursement.” How shocking then must the words have been about his children who will be strangers in a strange land, who will be oppressed, enslaved, and afflicted for four hundred years, and he himself will be buried without earning the fruits of his life. Faith, what a glorious promise you are and what an awful future.

Faith Between Profit and Proof

“Faith is born not in the answer but in the question, not in harmony but in dissonance.”⁴ Here, Abram comes close to the essence of faith:

- A “O Sovereign LORD, what do you give me?” (v. 2)
X “He believed” (v. 6)
A’ “O Sovereign LORD, how do I know?” (v. 8)

“Adonai, YHWH,” a divine title mostly translated as “O Lord, GOD.” It appears here for the first time and is rarely used in the Pentateuch. The word for “Lord” is adonai, “my Lord” not the divine name YHWH, and its use suggests a master-servant relationship. Sarna makes the point that “Abram does not permit his vexation to compromise his attitude of respect and reverence before God.”⁵

The first question, “what do you give me?” disregards the promise of a “very great reward” and with point-blank words points out that the promise of the heir is still not fulfilled. Now the emotions of ten years of waiting boil over. Disappointment, distrust and cynicism mix into each other. God responds accordingly in emphatic and unambiguous language, “this man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir” (v. 4).

The second question, “how do I know?” is a retort to the promise of the land. And then, there it is again, “he believed,” between the “what do I get?” and “how do I know?” Do you hear these questions? I hear these same questions asked in the big classrooms and in small conversations.

What is faith? How are we to communicate faith? The theological discussion about faith has enjoyed a long ride on the roller coasters of different philosophies and methodologies especially in the aftermath of the Reformation. Today a new entrant to this list has arisen; they call it metamodernism. Its emphasis is on the paradox, the juxtaposition, on oscillation between diametrically opposed poles, on a narrative, even a metanarrative, because there is so much craving for hope and meaning of life out there. Dialogue, not dialectics, questions, not answers, is what the metamodern person expects. S/he will often identify as spiritual but not religious, or as agnostic. Secular people need faith, too. Not creed or dogma, but faith in what is meaningful within our own reality.⁶

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now: On Being Jewish* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 54.

⁵ Sarna, *Genesis* (JPS), 113.

⁶ Read more here: <http://forward.com/my-heretical-year/325031/how-i-kept-my-faith-in-faith/>

In my reading of Genesis 15, I found the characterizations of metamodernism and came to realize that this masterfully crafted paradoxical narrative of faith is one that speaks to today's generation. "We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have the answers," said Abraham Joshua Heschel. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks put it this way, "Faith is born not in the answer but in the question, not in harmony but in dissonance."⁷

Let me take you back to Gen 15 one more time by asking this question: Is it truly faith when one goes all out and attempts to count stars? Pay attention to the narrator's flow of the story:

"Look up towards the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them" (v. 5)
"Now when the sun was going down" (v. 12)

"It came about when the sun had set" (v. 17)

I think, the biblical narrative is highly intentional here, making a bold point: it speaks twice of the setting of the sun (v. 12 and v. 17), but after challenging Abram to count the stars in the sky. And so, here may be the metanarrative that the metamodernist is looking for in the postmodern quest for faith. S/he knows well that counting stars is an impossibility in itself. More so, it would be ironic and cynical to try to do it with the sun still high up in the sky. One just looks up and must cover the eyes because the "heavens tell the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1) and "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" (Mal 4:2). "Awestruck" and "filled with wonder" could be better words for the metamodernist's spiritual world. For it is this very world where the sun still rises and sets, where the stars still glisten in the dark sky, and visions and dreams still fill the anxious soul while the fiery flame passes through cut-up bones and butchered pieces of meat. For, "Faith is not the clinging to a shrine but the endless, tameless pilgrimage of heart," Abraham Joshua Heschel concludes.

⁷ Jonathan Sacks, *Radical Then, Radical Now: On Being Jewish* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 54.