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Faith and Righteousness

GENESIS 15:1-6

According to the writers of Hebrews and the Genesis record, the link between faith and righteousness was not a New Testament invention, nor was it even a patriarchal innovation. Instead, the dynamic connection between faith and righteousness is rooted in primeval history well before the flood. The lives of three famous pre-diluvians—Abel, Enoch, and Noah—make this very clear.

Of Abel we read, “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks” ([Hebrews 11:4](#)). Faith-righteousness was exemplified in earth’s first family by the second son of Adam and Eve.

Of Enoch Genesis says, “Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him” ([5:24](#)). The metaphor “walked” indicates closest communion and intimacy—a righteous life. Enoch’s godly walk grew out of his faith, as Hebrews makes so

clear: “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God” (11:5). According to verse 6, his God-pleasing faith believed that “God is” (literal translation of the Greek)—that the sovereign God of creation is God. He also believed that God “rewards those who seek him”—that God is positively equitable. As a result, [Jude 14, 15](#) records that he became a preacher of righteousness, apparently for his entire life, for some three centuries! Enoch’s life demonstrated a righteousness based on faith.

Of Noah Genesis says, “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God” (6:9). That Noah “walked with God” identifies him with the godly character of Enoch. But even more significant, the statement that “Noah was a righteous man” is the first occurrence of the word righteous (*tsadiq*) in the Bible. Noah’s righteousness was not derived from his being perfect or any antecedent righteousness, but because he *believed* God, as the writer of Hebrews explains: “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household” (11:7). The biblical doctrine of imputed righteousness (a righteousness from God) began here in primeval history before the flood!

We must keep this in mind as we examine [Genesis 15:1–6](#), which is the Bible’s landmark text for understanding the rela-

tionship between faith and righteousness. Righteousness through faith was not new with Abram. It was intrinsic in primeval, pre-flood history—in the lives of Abel, Enoch, and Noah.

Primeval history ended with the flood and the rise and fall of the tower of Babel. Patriarchal history began with Abram's father Terah. And Abram became the great exemplar of faith—"the father of all who believe" ([Romans 4:11](#)). The curve of Abram's faith graphs unevenly. It soars when he hears God's word and leaves Ur, traveling west across the Fertile Crescent and down its side, south into Canaan. It spikes higher when Abram travels the land, building altars and calling on the name of the Lord. But the curve dives dramatically in his disastrous trip to Egypt. After Egypt, it gently rises when he returns to Canaan repentant and rises more in his generous faith-based dealings with Lot. Then in [chapter 14](#) the faith-curve again sweeps upward with his magnanimous rescue of Lot from the kings of the east and his continual magnanimity as he is blessed by Melchizedek, gives him gifts, and refuses to keep the plunder of the eastern kings. Abram models faith to the entire world.

ABRAM AND FAITH: THE LANDMARK PRINCIPLE (vv. 1–6)

Now, in the aftermath, Abram's great heart slows and spasms

with doubt and fear. This is not uncommon to human experience following strenuous victories. Elijah suffered similar effects after his victory over the priests of Baal at Mt. Carmel, even fleeing to the wilderness and asking God to let him die (cf. [1 Kings 18, 19](#)). Abram was tired, fearful, and despondent. Humanly, Abram had reasons to fear reprisals from the eastern coalition. Bigger armies might return.

Abram also had plenty of time for reflection in the postbellum quiet—his great victory had not brought him any nearer his promised inheritance. Long ago when he first responded to God’s call, Sarah was barren (cf. [11:30](#)). Their journey had begun in barrenness, but with hope in God’s promise. But the thousand-mile journey, the sojourn in Canaan, the fiasco in Egypt, the return to Canaan, and the victory over the kings were all carried out under the shadow of barrenness. Now barrenness persisted. Abram’s servants had children. Other men’s children clung to his garments. Likely, Abram mused, “So what if everybody knows my name from the Nile to the Euphrates? So what if I’m rich? What difference does it make if I have no children?” Restless, dark doubt gripped his faltering heart. Fearless Abram feared.

God speaks. Abram may have suffered his doubts in silence. The text does not say. But God knew what was going on inside Abram. And the close connection with the preceding text suggests the immediacy of God’s response:¹ “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision” (v. [1a](#)). Visions

(in contrast to dreams) in Scripture are for the purpose of communicating the word of God.² Abram had a vision in the night, but what he saw was not important. What he heard was: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (v. 1b).

The divine greeting (“Fear not, Abram”) shook him because it revealed that God knew all. Abram shivered in the nakedness of his exposed unbelief. This was a grace.

Next Abram, whose foes now extended from the Euphrates to the Nile, heard God say, “I am your shield” against every enemy (cf. [Psalm 3:3](#); [18:2](#); [28:7](#); [84:9](#); [91:4](#)). And then, in reference to Abram’s magnanimous refusal to have any share of the

¹ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 112.

² Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 418, explains:

Yahweh’s method of communicating with Abram was through a vision (*maḥ^azeh*), or literally “in the vision” (*bammaḥ^azeh*), a word that occurs only three more times in the OT ([Num. 24:4, 16](#); [Ezek. 13:7](#)). But related words which also mean “vision,” such as *ḥāzôn* (35 times), *ḥāzût* (5 times), and *ḥizzāyôn* (9 times), appear frequently. What is transmitted from God to a mortal in such visions is not a visual image but a word from God. This is what distinguishes a vision from a dream.... That God’s word was revealed most frequently to the prophets through a vision may suggest that in [Gen. 15:1](#) Abram is represented as a prophet, a designation specifically attached to him in [20:7](#). What follows in the vision is an oracle of assurance.

plunder he secured from the four kings, God said, “your reward shall be very great.” All Abram got for his labors was God. That’s all! God was teaching Abram to be satisfied with him alone. This demonstrates, of course, what God desires to give us as we submit to the disciplines of a life of faith. He teaches us to be satisfied with him as enough—our all in all.

Abram’s response. Exposed, Abram was stung into verbal lament and protest. This is the first time Abram speaks to God, his first dialogue. “But Abram said, ‘O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir’ ” (vv. 2, 3). Abram was unhappy, but he was careful to address God as “Lord GOD,” which emphasized that God was Master and he was the servant. Abram would not allow his distress to compromise his respect and reverence for God.³ Yet his skepticism in the light of the divine promise of “shield” and “great reward” edged toward blasphemy. His apparent conclusion was that God’s promise had been of no effect, so that a household servant like Eliezer would be his heir. Such adoption was common where he came from.⁴ So be it! *C’est la vie.*

³ Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 113.

⁴ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, p. 420, explains:

Scholars have noted that Abram’s suggestion reflects an adoption procedure known from the Nuzi texts. A childless couple adopts a son, sometimes a slave, to serve them in their lifetime and bury and

Abram was on the edge.

God's assurance. Now God dealt so tenderly and lovingly with his stumbling servant. First, God said, “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir” (v. 4). Three times previously God had promised Abram a multitude of descendants—initially when he called him in Ur (12:2), then in Canaan at Shechem where he built an altar (12:7), and last from the highest spot in central Palestine as Abram was surveying the promised land in every direction (13:14–16).

But what God now said was new. “It was not an argument but a revelation” (Kidner)⁵—a son from his own body would be his heir! The heir would be his congenital son. A further question would arise later in chapters 16, 17 having to do with whether barren Sarah could possibly be the mother. But Abram was rocked and captivated by the present revelation.

Again God spoke: “And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be’ ” (v. 5). Numerous times during the summer nights at our vacation place in Door County, Wisconsin, my wife and I have

mourn them when they die. In return for this service they designate the adopted son as the heir presumptive. Should a natural son be born to the couple after such action, this son becomes the chief heir, demoting the adopted son to the penultimate position.

⁵Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 123.

led our grandchildren and dogs out by flashlight to a dark road amidst the fields, turned the flashlights off, and gazed from horizon to horizon at the planets, the Milky Way of our galaxy, and the stars beyond. It is always an awesome family experience. The only unawed among us are the dogs, who never look up. They are occupied with their own universe of smells. We always talk about God. Such times are salutary for our souls.

Remember here that Abram had been a moon worshiper who had earlier stood atop the ziggurat in Ur topped with the temple of Nanna, the moon god. He was familiar with the planets and the astral trails. Now he was alone in the silence with God Almighty, who spoke. Abram was humbled, awed, and hushed. He said nothing. He was speechless. There were only stars and silence.

Abram's belief. What was happening here? Though Abram did not speak, Scripture does: “And he believed the LORD” (v. 6a.). The Hebrew sense is that he believed and continued believing the Lord.⁶ W. H. Griffith Thomas observes, “The original Hebrew for ‘believed’ comes from a root whence we derive our ‘Amen,’ and we might paraphrase it by saying that ‘Abraham said Amen to the Lord.’ ‘Amen’ in Scripture never

⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 329 explains: “The verbal form וַיִּשְׁמַע (waw + perfect) ‘he believed’ probably indicates repeated or continuing action. Faith was Abram’s normal response to the Lord’s words.”

means a petition ('May it be so'), but is always a strong assertion of faith ('It shall be so,' or 'It is so')."⁷

What happened within Abram? How did his faith come? Certainly it was not because he suddenly felt potent or that his expectations were raised. He simply rested on God's promise. In this moment God's word was not a theory about how things would turn out, but "the voice around which his life is organized" (Brueggemann).⁸ We know that Abram must also have repented. But ultimately his fresh faith can only be attributed to God. His faith was not a human achievement or the result of his moral will. It came from God, like Peter's later confirmation of Christ: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" ([Matthew 16:16](#)). How had Peter come to this? "And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven'" (v. 17). In the same way Abram moved from protest to confession by the power of God.⁹ As the Apostle Paul said, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" ([Ephesians 2:8, 9](#)).

This was, of course, not the first time that Abram had put

⁷ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946), p. 138.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, "Interpretation"* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), p. 144.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

his faith in God’s word. He had believed for over a decade (cf. [12:1ff.](#)). But here his faith was defined.

This clarification is a landmark in our understanding of faith: “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” ([15:6](#)). No other Old Testament text has exercised such an influence in understanding faith and on the New Testament itself. The verb *ḥāšab* means, as our text has it, “counted [or reckoned or imputed] it to him as righteousness”¹⁰ (cf. [Leviticus 7:18](#); [Numbers 18:27](#); [2 Samuel](#)

¹⁰ Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, p. [425](#), [426](#) explains, The verb *ḥāšab* has two basic meanings throughout the OT. One is “count, value, calculate.” The second is “plan, think out, conceive, invent.” The first encompasses the bringing together of numbers and quantities and values with an eye to weighing or evaluating or calculating. The second encompasses the bringing together of ideas and plans for some intended project. In addition, the OT provides instances of *ḥāšab* with an impersonal accusative object and a dative of the person involved, who is introduced by the preposition *le*, “to”; the meaning of this construction is “to reckon or credit something (as something) to someone’s account.” This idiom appears in both active and passive constructions. This is what one finds in [Gen. 15:6](#): (1) the verb *ḥāšab* (“he credited or reckoned”); (2) double impersonal accusative object, *-hā* (“it”) and *q̄dāqā* (“righteousness”); and (3) dative of the person involved, who is introduced with the preposition *le* (“to him”). Thus our translation, *he credited (or reckoned, imputed) it to him as righteousness*. A second instance of this construction appears in [2 Sam. 19:20](#) (Eng. 19). Shimei, the Benjamite secessionist who had

19:19; Psalm 32:2; and 106:31, which is the closest parallel). Note that Abram is not described as doing righteousness, but his faith was credited as righteousness. Abram, who was originally destitute of righteousness, was now counted as righteous through faith in God. As Von Rad has said, “But above all, his righteousness is not the result of any accomplishments, whether of sacrifice or acts of obedience. Rather, it is stated programmatically that belief alone has brought Abraham into a proper relationship to God.”¹¹

This understanding is revolutionary! Circa 2000 B.C., Abram was declared righteous because of his belief. This declaration was in profound accord with the primeval fathers Abel, Enoch, and Noah. Furthermore, the principle has remained operative through both primeval and patriarchal history and the entire old-covenant era and is the foundation of the new covenant.

led a revolt against David, now comes before a restored David and pleads for mercy. His plea to the king is “let my lord not reckon [*al-yah^ašāb*] to me [*lî*] [my] wrongdoing [*’āwōn*].” Again, we have the verb *hāšab*, followed by the dative of the person involved, introduced with the preposition *le*, and then the impersonal accusative object. This illustration is very close to Ps. 32:2, “blessed is the man whom Yahweh does not impute [*lōyahšōb*] to him [*lô*] iniquity [*’āwōn*].”

¹¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 180.

PAUL AND FAITH: THE UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLE

Genesis 15:6 is quoted in full in three New Testament passages—Romans 4, Galatians 3, and James 2.

Romans 4. This chapter is an extended exposition of Genesis 15:6 in which the text is quoted three times and the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew word *hāšab* (Greek *logizomai*)—“counted”—is quoted eleven times. In this chapter Paul argues that salvation comes only through faith for Abraham, then David, then the Gentiles, then for those under the Law.

David. In the case of King David, Paul refers to David’s blessedness and joyous relief at having his sins against Bathsheba and Uriah forgiven and an undeserved righteousness bestowed upon him, as described in Psalm 32:1, 2. Paul introduces this penitential Psalm in verse 6 and quotes its opening two verses in verses 7, 8:

David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,

and whose sins are covered;

*blessed is the man against whom the Lord will
not count his sin.” (emphasis added)*

Ostensibly, Paul turned to this Psalm because of the rabbinical principle of interpretation that when the same word is

used in two Biblical passages, each can be used to interpret the other. ([Genesis 15:6](#) and [Psalm 32:2](#) both contain the same word—*hāšab*, MT and *logizesthai*, LXX).¹²

But the burning reason Paul points to [Psalm 32:2](#) and its use of *hāšab/logizomai* is that David had broken three of the Ten Commandments outright when he coveted Bathsheba, committed adultery, and murdered Uriah—and the Old Testament sacrificial system made no provision for such premeditated sin (cf. [Numbers 15:22–31](#), esp. v. 30).¹³ This is why David cried in the parallel penitential [Psalm 51:16, 17](#):

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it;

¹² C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & Clark Limited, 1975), p. 323.

¹³ A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), p. 401 writes regarding [Psalm 51](#):

In verse 16 the underlying thought is, so it seems, that the Law simply does not prescribe any atoning sacrifices for such things as murder and adultery, and since these or similar grave offences may have been the cause of the Psalmist's downfall, it is clear that the only alternative was penitence (see verse 17; [2 Sam. 12:13ff.](#)). Even so, the cleansing is not the inevitable end-product of man's contrition, but it depends upon the faithfulness of God. Sacrifice, as a God-given means, functions only within the setting of the Covenant; if the Covenant relationship is broken by man, then also sacrifice and any other cultic means have lost their significance (cf. Eichrodt, TOT, 1, p. 168).

*you will not be pleased with a burnt offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*

David's case was hopeless. There was nothing he could do but cast himself on God's mercy. And this is what David did by faith—and thus God forgave his transgressions, covered his sin, and did not count his sins against him. In effect God credited him as righteous apart from works, as Paul said in [Romans 4:6](#). Regarding this, F. F. Bruce says of [Psalm 32](#): “And if we examine the remainder of the psalm to discover the ground on which he was acquitted, it appears that he simply acknowledged his guilt and cast himself in faith upon the mercy of God.”¹⁴

Paul here calls David blessed, and David twice calls himself “blessed” in [Psalm 32](#) because when there was no work that could possibly atone for his sins, he was forgiven on the basis of faith. So the principle of imputed righteousness was mightily illustrated in the life of Israel's greatest king—“a man after [God's] own heart” ([1 Samuel 13:14](#)). Likewise, nothing you and I can ever do can atone for our sins. Our only hope is “the righteousness of God [that] has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for

¹⁴ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1966), p. 111.

all who believe” ([Romans 3:21, 22](#)).

Gentiles. In respect to Gentiles, Paul argues in verses 9–12 that Abram was saved by faith while he was a Gentile, and therefore the faith principle is universal. Paul shows that [Genesis 15:6](#) occurred at least fourteen years before Abram was circumcised, and thus he was still a Gentile (cf. [Genesis 15:6; 16:16; 17:24](#)). Therefore both Jews and Gentiles have always been saved by faith.

Law. Paul also makes a similar argument in respect to those under the Law. Paul explains in verse 13, “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.” The historical fact is, as Paul has written in [Galatians 3:17](#), the Law came 430 years after Abraham was made heir to the promise by faith—and there is thus no way the Law could invalidate or restrict the scope of that promise.

To make the promise conditional on obedience to the Law, which was not even hinted at when the promise was given, would nullify the whole promise. Righteousness, and its promised benefits, has always come by faith to those who live by faith! “Don’t be fooled,” says Paul in effect, “the principle of faith transcends the Law.”

Abram was credited as righteous because of his faith. So was David. Righteousness through faith preceded the Jewish people and the Law. Salvation comes only through faith. That is the way it has always been.

Galatians 3. The second place in the New Testament where Paul makes major reference to *Genesis 15:6* is *Galatians 3:6–9*:

Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”... Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

Paul brilliantly argues here that the faith principle is what makes possible the blessing of all nations through Abraham. Thus the gospel is part of God’s initial call to Abraham.

James 2. Finally, James the Lord’s brother quotes *Genesis 15:6* in developing a balanced doctrine of faith that Paul in his passion did not assert:

*Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. (*James 2:20–24*)*

James argues that authentic faith is a faith that works. James never confused faith and works. He understood them to

be separate. James would agree that we are justified by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone! He would say that if your faith is alone, you are in the grip of an eternal delusion, and he would urge you to real faith—a faith that works.

It has always been the same—in primeval times and patriarchal times—under the old covenant and the new covenant: Faith brings righteousness and salvation.

So it was for Abel: “By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain” ([Hebrews 11:4](#)). Abel was saved by faith, a faith that was not alone because it produced better works than Cain.

So it was for Enoch: “By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death” ([Hebrews 11:5](#)). But Enoch’s faith was such that he “walked with God” ([Genesis 5:22](#)) before he was no more. His faith was a real faith—a faith that worked.

So it was for Noah: “By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith” ([Hebrews 11:7](#)). Noah’s profound faith produced a profound obedience. And his works were monumental: “He did all that God commanded him” ([Genesis 6:22](#); cf. [7:5, 9, 16](#)). His was a faith that worked.

So it was with Abram: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was

going” ([Hebrews 11:8](#)). “By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac” (v. [17a](#)). Abraham was saved by faith alone—a faith that was not alone—a faith that works!

We conclude this study with two penetrating questions. Have you rested your faith on God the Son, Jesus Christ, alone for your salvation? That is the first question. Are you trusting your works or Christ? Now if you answer, “I am trusting Christ alone,” then the second question is, has your faith produced works? Is your faith real enough that it has changed your life? These are salutary questions because you are saved by faith alone. But if it is true faith, it is faith that is not alone but a faith that works.

Salvation is in no other name but Jesus. Have you believed and trusted him alone for your salvation? And if you say you have, has your life changed? May this landmark text dominate your understanding of God’s revelation about faith and righteousness because it comes from his Word.

God's Covenant with Abram

GENESIS 15:7-21

As Abram gazed up to the starry vault of the night and contemplated God's promise—"So shall your offspring be" ([Genesis 15:5](#))—Abram believed the Lord. He saw the stars, and beyond the stars the promise, and beyond the promise, God himself. Abram believed with all his heart that a vast people would come from his own body. And on that silent night, that holy night, he inwardly breathed and, likely, voiced¹ an audi-

¹ Meredith G. Kline, "Abram's Amen," *Westminster Journal of Theology*, Vol. 31 (1968), pp. 2, 3 argues that אָמֵן ("and he believed") is "de-locutive," indicating a spoken formula or stock phrase had been verbalized. Says Kline:

This verse will then state not (explicitly) that Abram's inner attitude was one of faith but that his "Amen" (אָמֵן) is audible response to the word of God.

The fact that that statement appears in the context of a form of response adds plausibility to the interpretation presented here. [Genesis 15](#) is the account of a solemn covenant ritual and an "Amen"

ble “Amen” (“It is so”) to God. And God credited his belief to him as righteousness. Whatever translation is used, whether “credited” it, “reckoned” it, “counted” it, or “imputed” it, the meaning is the same. Abram’s righteousness was all God’s doing. As we saw in the previous chapter, this landmark text informs the Scriptures of both the old and new covenants and is our singular hope (cf. [Romans 3:27–30](#)).

God’s great promise to Abram, as it has been rolled out in chapters [12](#), [13](#), had two parts: a *people* (cf. [12:2](#); [13:16](#)) and a *land* ([12:1](#), [7](#); [13:14](#), [17](#)). So now God proceeded to encourage Abram’s heart and faith by raising the issue of the land: “And he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess’ ” ([15:7](#)).

The opening phraseology (“I am the LORD who brought you out”) is monumental language because God would later use an almost identical formula to introduce the Mosaic covenant at Sinai: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the

response by the covenant vassal in such ceremonies is attested in the records of both biblical and extrabiblical covenants. Also indicative of the external-procedural rather than internal-psychological level of

[Genesis 15:6](#) is the terminology of its second clause. The verb חשב, “reckon,” is employed for the rendering of decisions in cultic-judicial process (cf. [Lev. 7:18](#); [17:4](#); [Num. 18:27](#)). And the substance of the divine reckoning, “righteousness,” points to the judicial locution, “You are in the right.” Thus, in the case of Yahweh’s act, too, intimations of an outward occurrence are present in [Genesis 15:6](#) itself.

land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” ([Exodus 20:2](#)). Thus the two most formative events in the history of the Jewish people—Abram’s exodus from Ur and Moses’ exodus from Egypt —were prefaced with identical language.² Also, both the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant were based on sovereign acts of salvation: first in Abram’s deliverance from Ur and then in Moses’ deliverance from Egypt. As we proceed we will see that what happens here with Abram in Canaan neatly foreshadows the setting for Moses at Sinai.

Prompted by God’s declaration, Abram naturally inquired about the land: “But he said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’ ” (v. 8). It was the question of a believing heart, and consistent with the strongest faith that God, of course, knew full well was in Abram. In a later similar situation, when Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, asked the same question when he was told by Gabriel that he and his barren Elizabeth would have a son—“How shall I know this?” ([Luke 1:18](#))—he was struck dumb for his unbelief. Abram’s question was more in the attitude of “I believe; help my unbelief!” (cf. [Mark 9:24](#)).

Covenant preparation. Abram’s humble request was followed by a divine order and his obedient preparation. “He said to him, ‘Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young

²Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 114.

pigeon’ ” (v. 9). Abram understood exactly what God was ordering him to do because this custom was common in Abram’s Mesopotamian homeland where when two parties solemnized a promise/covenant, they would kill a donkey, divide it in two, and arrange the halves so that the covenanting parties could walk between the sundered body of the animal.³

The ceremony dramatized a self-imposed curse should either of the covenanting parties break the pledge. The sense was: “If I break my word, may I become like this severed animal!” The nearest scriptural parallel to this would come later from the time of Jeremiah, when the leaders of Jerusalem proclaimed the freeing of their slaves and then went back on their

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 114, 115 explains:

In the Mari texts “to kill a donkey foal” (*hayarum/ayarum qatālummm/šuqqtulum*) is to conclude a covenant. At Alalakh they “cut the neck of a sheep” (*kišad/immerumithuh*) for the same purpose. All these analogues demonstrate that the cutting up of the animal was a crucial element in the treaty-making procedure. Its retributive meaning is suggested by the only other biblical parallel ([Jer. 34:17–20](#)). The cutting of the animals is thus a form of self-imprecation in which the potential violator invokes their fate upon himself. This is confirmed by the above cited Sfire treaty, which includes the following clause; “As this calf is cut up, thus Matti’el and his nobles shall be cut up” (1:40). A similar clause occurs in a treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Matti’ilu of Arpad. The fate of the animal is explicitly projected upon the violator.

word. To these promise-breakers Jeremiah, speaking for God, cried:

You have not obeyed me by proclaiming liberty, every one to his brother and to his neighbor; behold, I proclaim to you liberty to the sword, to pestilence, and to famine, declares the Lord. I will make you a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts—the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth. (Jeremiah 34:17–20)

Here in Genesis, Abram was directed to use five distinctive animals, all of which would become standard sacrifices when the Mosaic covenant was instituted. Though slaughtered and sundered, the animals were not sacrificed. There was no altar, no fire, no burning. Their symbolic purpose was to represent God's covenant people much as in the same way these animals would represent them before God in the future sacrificial system. So Abram killed the animals and arranged the halves of the heifer, goat, and ram to line a gruesome covenant path. Apparently the dove and young pigeon were not halved because they were so small but were placed on opposite sides

of the path facing each other.

The assault by the carrion-eating birds of prey and Abram's driving them away foreshadowed the attacks that would come upon Abram's offspring from the nations and God's protection (both of which will be described in part in God's following covenant promises).

Evidently the daylight following Abram's belief under the stars had been spent in his carrying out God's directives—slaughtering the animals, arranging them into the covenant path, and fending off the birds—as he awaited further directions for the covenantal pageant. However, the weary patriarch was not conscious for the covenant ceremony because “As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him” (v. 12). Abram's sleep engulfed him in terrifying darkness, which “reflects a human emotion that is inspired most often by Yahweh's presence” (Hamilton).⁴ Later the covenant at Sinai would be inaugurated in a similar darkness (cf. [Exodus 19:16–18](#)), and ultimately the new covenant of Christ's blood would spring from the darkness over the cross (cf. [Matthew 27:45](#)). Here in Genesis amidst the initial darkness God would

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 434 lists references that associate fright with divine pressure: [Exodus 15:16](#), where it is parallel to *pahad*; [23:27](#); [Deuteronomy 32:25](#); [Psalm 88:16](#) (Eng. 15); [Job 9:34](#) and [13:21](#).

encourage Abram with a meticulously crafted promise about the land, which then would be followed by a spectacular ratification of the promise.

LAND COVENANT DETAILED (vv. 12–16)

God’s promise was described in sequence—*how*, to *whom*, *when*, and *why* the land would be given.

How. The means by which Abram’s descendants would come to possess the land would be a terrible ordeal. “Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know for certain that 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. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions’” (vv. 13, 14). Prophesying in round numbers, God foretold Abram that his followers would be enslaved for four hundred years in an undesignated land (which we know to be Egypt).⁵ The word

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 435, explains:

The *four hundred years* of exile mentioned here (which Stephen quotes in [Acts 7:6](#)) seems not to match the four hundred and thirty years of exile mentioned in [Exod. 12:40–41](#) (which Paul quotes in [Gal. 3:17](#)). We take it that the *four hundred years* refers to both the period of sojourning and the eventual enslavement. The best way to reconcile these different numbers is to see that “the 400 years is a round figure in prospect, while the 430 years is more precise in retrospect.”

“afflicted” is the same Hebrew word used in Exodus to describe the oppression that the Israelites experienced in Egypt as they built the store cities for Pharaoh (cf. 1:11). This was the historical outworking of Abram’s vision of birds of prey descending on the slain animals. And it is possible that the carrion birds directly referenced his descendants’ abuse at the hands of the Egyptians because the Egyptian falcon god Horus was a carrion-eating bird.⁶

As we know, Egypt would be severely punished for its mistreatment of Israel through the ten plagues that culminated with the death of their firstborn sons as the death angel passed over (cf. Exodus 6:6; 7:4; 12:12). When Israel left in the exodus, the Egyptians were so eager that they go that Israel actually “plundered” the Egyptians: “The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the LORD had given the

⁶ Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 115 explains:

Hebrew *'ayit*, here taken as a collective “birds of prey,” is most likely the carrion-eating falcon (cf. Isa. 18:6; Ezek. 39:4). In Egyptian art this bird represents the important god Horus with whom the living king was identified. It is possible, therefore, that the sudden appearance of the birds of prey, and of Abram successfully warding them off, symbolically portends the sharp and menacing change that is to take place in the fortunes of the Israelites at the hands of the Egyptians while it also prefigures their rescue through the merit of the patriarch.

people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians” ([Exodus 12:35, 36](#)). These explicit prophecies of a captivity and exodus must have been shocking knowledge for Abram. But the information was also helpful. The long Egyptian captivity could not block the fulfillment of the promises! Moses, especially, would find strength in this knowledge as he led the revolt and exodus from Egypt.

To whom. Abram must have been further shocked by the next line: “As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age” (v. 15). Abram had to accept the fact that he would *not* possess the land. Hard knowledge. But that was also good for him to know—especially with what lay ahead in his long life. This knowledge also promoted a calm certitude for the aging patriarch in knowing that he would die “in peace,” *shalom*. As Abram aged and his skin wrinkled and his eyes dimmed, his gaze turned even more to the city whose architect and builder is God.

When, and why the 400 years? There is no contradiction between “four hundred years” (v. 13) and the statement in verse 16, “And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” This is because a “generation” could mean a lifetime, and during the patriarchal period that equaled at least a hundred years. So the round number 400 and the four generations of our text and the 430 years specified in [Exodus 12:40](#) all describe the

same long period ending with the exodus.⁷

The 400 years, of course, was important as a mark by which to count the progress of history. But of far greater significance is the reason for the four centuries—namely, “the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (v. 16b). God was revealing to Abram that he is patient beyond human calculation. This long-suffering on the part of God was memorialized by Paul in this question: “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” ([Romans 2:4](#)). Long-suffering is God’s *modus operandi* in history.

And the Amorites (the inhabitants of Canaan) would take full advantage of the divine patience. According to W. F. Albright, the three principal goddesses of the Canaanite pantheon—Astarte (Ashtaroth), Anath, and Asherah—were primarily concerned with sex and war. “Sex was their primary function.”⁸ [Leviticus 18:1–24](#) lists twelve variations of incest that were endemic to Canaan along with adultery, child sacrifice, sexual perversion, and bestiality, concluding with this warning: “Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you

⁷ Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 125. See also Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 116 for a fuller explanation.

⁸ W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Ancient Israel*, 4th ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1956), pp. 74, 75.

have become unclean” (v. 24; cf. v. 27).

There ultimately would come a day when the Amorites had reached the point of no return—their cup would be full. And that is when God unleashed a flood of Israelites out of Egypt and across the Jordan. In truth, Joshua’s invasion was actually “an act of justice, not aggression” (Kidner).⁹ And the universal fact is, the history of the world is under the moral governance of God. The displacement of the Amorites by Israel was not simply the result of divine favoritism.¹⁰ They had long flaunted God’s moral law.

Again the emphasis here in Genesis is not on the wrath of God, but on the patience of God. We may look at the prosperity of the wicked. We may look at the rise of Hitlers and Stalins and Pol Pots and genocide around the world and the puerile depravity of our own media and call out to God, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long ...?” ([Revelation 6:10](#)). But we must remember, as Donald Grey Barnhouse said, “If the iniquity of the world had been full a hundred years ago, none of us would have been born to be born again.”¹¹ Bless God for his patience!

God’s purpose behind this meticulous revelation to Abram was to strengthen his faith and to encourage him regarding

⁹ Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, p. 125.

¹⁰ Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 117.

¹¹ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), p. 118.

the truth that the land would one day go to his descendants. Certainly as he observed the decadence of the Amorites over his long life, this teaching would hearten him.

Yet there was more here. Abram learned that suffering would precede glory. This is the abiding order that Paul reminded believers of on his first missionary journey: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” ([Acts 14:22](#)). Even though Abram would die in peace, God’s great promise to him was ultimately on the other side of the grave. Abram’s life had one trial after another. Isaac was not yet born. Think of the tests that were coming! Nevertheless, “by faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land” ([Hebrews 11:9](#)).

This divine preview of history with its precise predictions and explicit dating taught Abram that God is sovereign in history. Process Theology and Openness Theology have no place here. God controls every detail of history. The forty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, which so magnificently chronicles God’s sovereignty and direction of history, bears this divine query:

*Who told this long ago?
Who declared it of old?
Was it not I, the LORD?
And there is no other god besides me,
a righteous God and a Savior;
there is none besides me. ([Isaiah 45:21](#))*

LAND COVENANT RATIFIED (vv. 17–21)

Abram had taken in all the varied details of the promise in the thick and dreadful darkness of his deep sleep. They were filed in his slumbering mind and would inform his future actions.

Unilateral ratification. But Abram was certainly not prepared for the fireworks that came in the pyrotechnic confirmation of the covenant. “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces” (v. 17). God made a fiery appearance as a smoking firepot radiating orange in the darkness. It was a theophany, a visual manifestation of God! Moses would view a similar phenomenon in the burning bush (cf. [Exodus 3:2](#)). Israel would see it at Sinai when they “came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven” ([Deuteronomy 4:11](#)). “The LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln” ([Exodus 19:18](#)). Israel saw it again in the pillar of cloud by day and the cloud of fire by night (cf. [Exodus 13:21](#)). It symbolized God’s unapproachable holiness.

Then the glowing furnace moved, gliding down the aisle lined with the animal parts that glistened in the fire’s light. Surely an ecstasy gripped Abram’s soul! He had not been asked to join in the pageant—to pass with God between the pieces. It was God alone. **This was an unconditional, unilateral covenant. God (with astounding condescension) was symboliz-**

ing that if he were to break his word, he would be sundered like the butchered animals. It was an acted-out curse, a divine self-imprecation guaranteeing that Abram's descendants would get the land or God would die. And God cannot die.

Then God spoke. Perhaps his words emanated from the blazing furnace, just as when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. His voice conveyed the most specific delineation of the land and its inhabitants in Scripture. "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites" (vv. 18–21). This promise would be actualized briefly during the apex of David's reign, only to dissolve under Solomon.¹² And today modern Israel approximates the

¹² Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, Vol. 1, p. 438, explains,

God obliges himself to give to Abram's descendants the land of ten nations, all of which fall within the land of Canaan proper. The *river of Egypt* (see Num. 34:5; Josh. 15:4, which use *nahal* instead of *nāhār*) is not the Nile but the modern Wadi el-Arish, the dividing lines between Palestine and Egypt. The geographical extremes of the promise obviously extend beyond Canaan, witnessed especially by the phrase *to the great river, the river Euphrates*. In fact, only during the apogee of David's reign, many hundreds of years later, was this promise actualized. But even then the empire was maintained only for a

ancient designations.

Think what elevation this stunning revelation brought to Abram's soul. First, under the stars Abram had believed that a countless people would come from his own body—and God credited it to him as righteousness. Now with the same faith he believed that the land would someday go to his people. The darkness was gone. All was light. His fears and doubts fled. Abram was at the pinnacle. Joy flooded his soul. God's fiery presence departed, and Abram awoke.

Today some 4,000 years have passed since that wondrous event. And what does it mean to us? Iain Duguid answers:

By what figure could God have demonstrated his commitment more graphically to Abram? How could it have been displayed more vividly? The only way would have been for the figure to become a reality, for the ever living God to take on human nature and taste death in the place of the covenant-breaking children of Abram. And that is precisely what God did in Jesus Christ. On the cross, the covenant curse fell completely on Jesus, so that the guilty ones who place their trust in him might experience the blessings of the covenant. Jesus bore the punishment for our sins, so that God might be our God and we might be his people.¹³

generation. By Solomon's time cracks appeared in the empire, and portions of the empire rebelled and reclaimed their own land for themselves.

¹³ Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*

Fellow Christians, “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” ([Galatians 3:29](#)). By God’s Word you are now part of Abram’s offspring, his *people*. And there is an ultimate *land* awaiting you, the same land to which Abram went, full of years and in peace.

Again, what more could God do than this theophany? Could there be a greater condescension than his self-curse should he break his word? Yes! He could become incarnate among us, and he could become a curse for us, that we might become the righteousness of God. The Scriptures say, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith” ([Galatians 3:13, 14](#)). And again, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” ([2 Corinthians 5:21](#)).

What a God and Savior we have! Abram’s God is the God of creation, the God of the universe. He is the sovereign God who scripts history. He is the long-suffering God whose kindness reaches out today to the lost. He is the One who has extended history so that we might be born so that we could be born again. He is the One who guides us through the sufferings by which we enter the kingdom. He is the One upon whom the

(Phillipsburg, NJ:
P & R Publishing, 1999), p. 59.

covenant curse fell, so that we guilty ones who trust him might be heirs of the blessings.

Fellow believers, I am convinced that our view of God is everything. Some Christians, because they believe in the God of Scriptures (the God of Abraham), have a big God. But others have a small God. I believe that what you think about God is everything, because if you have a big God, then you have a God who, through his Son, redeemed you to be his people.

- You have a God who will give you the land.
- You have a God who will lead you through much suffering into the kingdom.
- You have a God who will do miracles in your life.
- You have a God to direct your life.
- You have a God who will answer prayers.
- You have a God to whom you must give all your love.

The question is, is your God the God of Abraham, the God of this text? Or is he a God of your own puny imagination or your sinful reductionism? If you have the God of the Bible, you will be able to stand tall, even until the sin of our culture has reached its full measure.