ABRAHAM'S RIGHTEOUSNESS (GENESIS XV 6)

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Few individual texts from the OT have a more weighty history of interpretation than the famous words of Gen. xv 6: “And he [Abraham]1 put his faith in Yahweh, and he [sc. Yahweh] reckoned it to him as righteousness”. Paul used Gen. xv 6 as a key text in his argument for the nature of the Gospel (Gal. iii; Rom. iv) in a way that was foundational for Christian theology. Other interpreters in the Graeco-Roman world were also agreed about the importance of the verse, although the Jewish tradition of reading it in close conjunction with Gen. xxii meant that its significance could be developed in a way somewhat different from that of Paul (e.g. James ii 14–26).2 Later, the centrality for Luther of the concepts of “righteousness” and of “faith” ensured that Gen. xv 6, as interpreted by Paul and Luther, would have an important role within Protestant theology.

It should be appreciated that these interpreters were in no way arbitrary when they attributed great significance to Gen. xv 6, for the verse is clearly remarkable on its own terms within its OT context. First, the text uses two important theological terms, “have faith” (heōemvn) and “righteousness” (σδαγαν), which only here in the OT occur in conjunction with each other. Moreover, σδαγαν is one of the central concepts of the OT, which means that Gen. xv 6 necessarily resonates within the wider context of the theology of the OT and its interpretation must in one way or another take that wider context into account. Secondly, the verse represents an interpretative

1 For convenience, I will use the familiar form “Abraham” throughout the article, even though within Gen. xv the form “Abram” is used.

2 Another striking example is 1 Macc. ii 52, Ἀβραάμ ὁδὲ ἐν πειρασμῷ εὐρέθη πιστὸς [i.e. Gen. xxii 1, 12], καὶ ἐλογίσθη τῶν ὑπὸ δικαιοσύνην; [i.e. Gen. xv 6]. On the understanding of Gen. xv 6 in Tannaitic literature and the NT, see e.g. F. Hahn, “Genesis 15.6 im Neuen Testament”, in H.W. Wolff (ed.), Probleme biblischer Theologie (Munich, 1971), pp. 90–107; J.D.G. Dunn, Romans 1–8 (Waco, Texas, 1988), pp. 200–1, 226–7.
comment about Abraham of a kind otherwise unparalleled in the patriarchal narratives. Usually, editorial comments within the Abraham stories relate to circumstances observable within the normal context of life, noted from a temporal perspective ("at that time", "to this day", Gen. xii 6, xiii 7, xxii 14), and do not purport to give access to the mind and purposes of God. So far as the stories contain explicit theological interpretation they present it within the world of the story, most obviously within certain divine speeches (e.g. Gen. xii 1–3, xviii 17–19). Only in Gen. xv 6 does the writer express a theological judgement that to some extent stands outside the story, so far as he describes a divine attitude in the third person ("he [sc. Yahweh] reckoned it to him as righteousness") rather than presenting a statement by Yahweh in the first person as elsewhere. In terms of the customary "I – thou" dialogue between Yahweh and Abraham one might perhaps have expected the text to be something like "And Yahweh said to him, 'You are righteous before me'" (wayyō-mer yhwh ṣēlāyw ṣaddīq ṣatta ḫpānay). It is the presentation of the theological judgement in the third-person form that has enabled the verse to be used as a theological principle independent (to some extent) of the story in which it is set. Thus both the content and the form of Gen. xv 6 mark it out as exceptional within the Abraham traditions.

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At first sight, the interpretation of Gen. xv 6 does not appear to present any obvious problems. Its context presents no difficulty: it is a dialogue between Yahweh and Abraham. Yahweh opens with

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3 The same is also true to a lesser degree with regard to Gen. xv 18a, "On that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram", which functions as an interpretation of the accompanying narrative. However, it stands out less from its context, both because it continues a third-person narrative, and because of the way it serves to introduce the following speech. On xv 18a see below, p. 128.

4 So, for example, von Rad comments that Gen. xv 6 is a "solemn statement" which "almost has the quality of a general theological tenet": Genesis (3rd edn, London, 1972), p. 185; cf. Das erste Buch Mose. Genesis (5th edn, Göttingen, 1958), p. 156.

5 It is commonly argued that the dialogue should be understood against the traditio-historical background of human address and divine oracle in a cultic context (so e.g. O. Kaiser, "Traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung von Gen. 15", ZAW 70 [1958], pp. 107–26; N. Lohfink, Die Landverheißung als Eid [Stuttgart, 1967], pp. 48–9; H.H. Schmid, "Gerechtigkeit und Glaube. Genesis 15, 1–6 und sein biblisch-theologischer Kontext", Ev Th 40 [1980], pp. 398–9). But even if this is correct (the main difficulty being that the precise sequence in Gen. xv 1–6, with the divine assurance at the outset, is otherwise unparalleled), it lies sufficiently in the background to be of only limited assistance in interpreting the passage as it stands in its present narrative context.