

Parashah Twelve

Genesis 15:1–21; Zephaniah 3:8–20; Romans 4:1–9

notes by Tim Hegg

“He reckoned it to him as righteousness”

Our text begins with “After these things,” a note to remind us that the events of this chapter occurred when the battle against the kings was still fresh in the mind and experience of Abram. Living as a nomad, Abram was vulnerable to marauding kings and their yearly campaigns. It is when our vulnerability is made clear that the word of God is all that more precious. “The word of HaShem came to Abram” (v. 1). God’s word is the fountain of strength for His people.

The vision that was given to Abram was the very word of God, assuring him that the faithful protection promised in the covenant was still intact. But notice carefully that the protection afforded Abram is not something provided by an intermediary, but is provided directly by God’s own presence: “I am your shield.” Shield from what? From marauding kings? Yes. But more than that. God Himself is the shield that deflects all manner of harm from those He has chosen. And as we read further in our *parashah*, we discover that there is far more at stake than Abram’s temporal safety. Eternal issues are there as well. In fact, the most important issue at hand is how God views Abram: does He consider him righteous or not? And what constitutes being righteous in God’s eyes? Here is the eternal dimension of His “shield.” He has determined to reckon Abram as righteous, and thus, “your reward shall be very great.”

The text is not exhaustive in telling us all of the details, but it is clear from Abram’s response that he understood the vast dimensions of God’s promise to him. He says, “O Lord GOD, what will You give to me, seeing that I am childless ...” (v. 2). What first arrests our attention is the Name by which Abram addresses God. He calls out to Him as אֲדֹנָי יְהוָה, *Adonai YHVH*. This is the first time in the Bible that this name combination is used, and we will see why this is significant. First, however, we need to understand that the English translations have had a difficulty translating this Name. That is because generally the English translations have adopted the convention of translating the four-letter name of God, YHVH (called the Tetragrammaton), by “LORD,” in all capital letters. However, the word *Adonai*, which means “master,” when referring to God is also translated by the English “Lord” (capital “L” with lower case “ord”). If they were to remain consistent, the name used here by Abram would be “LORD Lord,” which does not make for a very good translation! Most, therefore, have opted to translate it “Lord GOD,” putting “God” in all caps to signify that

it, in this case, is a translation of YHVH.

But the reason this Name is so significant is that Abram's use of it here is specifically attached to the covenant God is making with him, so that it's use in subsequent Scripture signals a special attachment to the on-going fulfillment of the covenant promises. In the Torah, this name combination is used only in our *parashah*, and in Deut 3:24 and 9:26. It is also found in Joshua and Judges (Josh 7:7; Judg 6:22; 16:28) and 1Kgs 2:26; 8:53. It is found extensively in the later prophets: Isaiah (26x), Jeremiah (14x), and Ezekiel (217x). It is found four times in the Psalms (69:6; 71:5, 16; 73:28). In the Torah and former Prophets, however, if this Name combination is studied in context, there is a marked attachment to covenant promises. But perhaps most significant is the use of this name combination in 2Sam 7, the text that deals with the Davidic Covenant. There, suddenly, this specific Name of God is used by David seven times (18, 19[2x], 20, 22, 28, 29)! By utilizing this unique compound Name, David is indicating that he understood the covenant being made with him was tied to the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, and specifically of the promised Seed Who would bring God's blessing to all the nations (note 2Sam 7:19, which in the Hebrew reads "this is the Torah for mankind, O Lord GOD.").

In our *parashah*, Abram's attention is not merely on his temporal safety, as important as this was, but also upon the longevity and eternal aspect of the covenant. This is why he goes to the core issue, the need for a son to carry the covenant promises into the next generation. Apart from a son, his inheritance, including the Land that God had promised to him in perpetuity, would go to his trusted servant, Eliezar, one born within his household, but not a member of Abram's family. According to Ancient Near Eastern custom, the inheritance goes to the chief servant if no heir exists. But Abram knew that the promise was given to him and to his descendants, not to someone outside of his family. And thus he calls upon God to make actual what He had promised. Abram's request to God is based upon what God had already promised to do.

The response of God is said, once again, to come via His word, "the word of the LORD came to him saying" God assures Abram that he will indeed have a son, and then He takes Abram outside to give him a sign of the promise He has just made. But the sign itself requires faith. For God shows Abram the stars and declares: "So shall your descendants (literally "seed") be." Not only would Abram have a son, but the descendants of Abram would endure from generation to generation, so that in the end, the offspring of Abram would be beyond counting.

But would God's word—His promise of a son—be enough for Abram? After all, it had been some time (perhaps as much as 20 years by the Sages'

reckoning) since the initial promise had been given, and there was still no son. Sarai was still barren. In fact, God’s word *was* enough for Abram, as the next verse (v. 6) indicates. “And he believed in the LORD.” Moses has reserved this clear statement of Abram’s faith for the moment when the promised son is specifically the focus of attention. Surely Abram believed from the time that God first revealed Himself to him. His actions prove his faith: he left Ur, travelled to the place that God had indicated, forsook the idolatry of his fathers, and worshipped the One true God. But Moses intends us to see that Abram’s faith was cast upon God in a particular fashion—in connection with the promise of a son. And thus we have the all important verse: “And he believed in the LORD, and He reckoned (חָשַׁב, *chashav*) it to him as righteousness.”

What does it mean that Abram “believed in the LORD?” The Hebrew is: וַיִּהְיֶה אֱמִן בַּיהוָה, *v’he’emin b’YHVH*. It does not mean, as some have suggested, that “Abram was faithful to the LORD,” as though Abram’s obedience is thus reckoned by God as sufficient for righteousness. Here, as in Hab 2:4, the verb אָמַן, *‘aman*, means “to trust,” “to rely upon.” Moreover, when followed by the preposition בְּ, (“in” or “upon”), it denotes a reliance upon or trusting in a specific object. In this case, the object of Abram’s faith was God Himself. This means that he relied fully and completely upon God and His word, not upon anything he could do or had done himself.

This verse became a cornerstone of Paul’s teaching. In explaining Gen 15:6, Paul writes (Rom 4:4-5):

Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness,

From this we learn an important lesson about Abram’s faith. His believing was not considered by God as a righteous deed that warranted His favor. Paul says, “But to the one who does not work, but believes....” Thus, faith is not a good work which merits God’s favor. In fact, saving faith is just the opposite: it is a recognition that one is unable to acquire his own righteousness. Faith is the genuine confession of one’s inability, and that therefore one’s hope of being righteous is only and entirely in God and what He will do. Like the farmer who commits the seed to the ground, recognizing that the success of the crop is out of his hands, so the child of God casts his future wholly upon God and His word.

It is upon the basis of this kind of faith that righteousness is reckoned by God, for He knows what He plans to accomplish in the life of His chosen one. When the believer casts himself upon his Master, he relinquishes any sense of self-righteousness, and trusts that God will accomplish what

he cannot. And God, promising to finish what He has begun by giving faith in the first place (Phil 1:6), sees the end from the beginning, and accredits to the believer the inevitable righteousness which will increasingly characterize the believer. For He has set Himself to bring everyone who believes into complete conformity to His Son, Yeshua. God, Who exists beyond time, credits us *now* with the full righteousness that we will attain in the *future* when we are fully conformed to the image of Messiah.

Thus Abram, before ever being circumcised, is reckoned righteous before God on the basis of his faith (cf. Rom 4:10–11). He stands, therefore, as the paradigm for faith—a high mark in God’s revelation of how He intends to declare sinners righteous.

In telling the story, Moses reserved this bold statement about Abram’s faith to accompany God’s promise of a son. Likewise, the covenant ratification ceremony takes place only after the promised son is announced. This emphasizes that the success of the covenant depended upon the seed of Abram, and is a clear foreshadowing of the ultimate Seed, the Messiah (cf. Gal 3:6, 16).

The covenant ceremony follows a common practice of the Ancient Near East in terms of covenant enactment. Animals are slain, and the slaughtered pieces arranged to create a path through which the covenant members would walk. During the procession, each would say something like, “may I be as these if I fail to uphold my side of the covenant.” The language of our text would indicate that Abram envisioned a similar ceremony. He expected to take the oath, along with God, as an equal, covenant member.

But that was not God’s plan. After the animals are slain, God puts Abram into a deep sleep (the same word [תַּרְדֵּמָה, *tardeimah*], used for the deep sleep into which God put Adam, cf. Gen 2:21). Then, in a dramatic scene of covenant enactment, a flaming torch and a smoking pot pass between the pieces to seal the covenant. It does not take too much thought to connect these symbols of God’s presence with the pillar of cloud and fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness. The point of the enactment is clear: the covenant would depend entirely upon God, not upon Abram, for only God takes the covenant oath. The covenant was essentially one sided—its success would be God’s doing, and His alone.

But why two symbols for the presence of God? Why both a flaming torch and a smoking pot? We might connect these to the brazen altar (the place where sacrifice was consumed by fire) and the golden altar (or the altar of incense) that would become the focal point of worship in the Tabernacle and Temple. The covenant promises made to Abram, indeed, his righteous standing before God, would depend upon the sacrifice as

a “sweet aroma,” (incense) in the sense of being acceptable before the Almighty. God Himself would pay the ultimate covenant price to assure the success of the covenant. He would give His own Son as the necessary price for righteousness to be awarded to sinners. Likewise, in good Semitic fashion, a matter is confirmed by two or three witnesses. As the author of Hebrews notes:

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself.... (Heb 6:13)

We should notice that in our *parashah* and its description of the Abrahamic covenant, the Land becomes a primary focus. The borders of the Land are delineated by the nations that currently resided there, and God and Abram survey the Land which is given in the covenant. Moreover, a prophecy is given to Abram regarding the Land: his descendants would be taken out of the Land, and would be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years. But afterwards, they would return to the Land to subdue the wayward nations that resided there. Thus, the exodus itself is secured by the promise God was making with Abram (cf. Ex 6:2–6).

Why the focus on the Land in the ratification of the covenant? This is because God intended Abram (and us) to know that the covenant being enacted with Abram was in the form of a “Land Grant Treaty,” common in the Ancient Near East. In such a covenant, a Great King awards his loyal vassal a parcel of Land which is given in perpetuity. Such a Land Grant depends entirely upon the Great King, not upon the vassal. It is a “promise” type of covenant, and is eternal. Even if, in subsequent years, the vassal becomes disloyal to the Great King, the granted land parcel cannot be taken away from his family—it belongs to them forever.

Thus, even in the very form in which the covenant is revealed, both its one-sidedness and its eternal nature are made known. God’s promises to Abram’s descendants are secure on the basis of God’s character. To suggest that wayward Israel could somehow cause the covenant to fail, and God’s promises to be withdrawn, is not only bad exegesis, it is devastatingly poor theology, for it brings into question the very holiness and faithfulness of God.

So our *parashah* brings us, once again, to the core issue of faith. Like Abram and Sarai (cf. Heb 11:10), we must cast ourselves upon God and His word, recognizing that God and God alone is able to bring us to Himself, and to declare us righteous on the basis of what He intends to make us. May our lives be characterized by that all important verse of our text: “And he believed in the LORD.”

The fact that the Sages of old chose Zeph 3 as the *haftarah* for our

parashah is insightful. The vision of Zephaniah is the full restoration of Israel from her exile, which had resulted from her disobedience to God and the covenant He had made with her. The King of Israel, Adonai, is “in her midst,” and never again would she be estranged from Him, for the promise is that “never again will you be haughty on My holy mountain” (v. 11). How is this possible? Could not Israel, as she had done before, rebel yet one more time against her God, and bring upon herself the punishment of the covenant? Apparently not! Zephaniah’s vision is of the restoration of Israel in the last days, and the ushering in of the world to come. This is parallel to Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant in which Israel’s heart is changed by having the Torah written upon it, and as a result, she finds true forgiveness of sin: “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” (Jer 31:34).

Thus, to the *parashah* in which righteousness is stated as the characteristic of Abraham on the basis of his faith, the Sages point to the same faith, and the same accredited righteousness, which Israel as a whole will experience in her restoration to the Lord in the last days. Moreover, the linking of the prophetic section with our *parashah* emphasizes the eternal nature of the promise made to Abraham. For in our Torah section the initiation of the covenant is told, while in the prophetic passage the end of the story is related. From beginning to end, God is faithful to His word, and this may well be the primary reason for choosing the *haftarah* portion as the Sages did. But we should also note that in choosing this *haftarah*, the Sages have viewed the successive covenants of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic as one united thread. Paul did the same thing when, in Ephesians 2:12, he refers to “the covenants (plural) of the promise (singular).” The unconditional covenant made to Abraham and ratified in our Torah portion, is not independent of the subsequent Mosaic covenant at Sinai, nor of the Davidic covenant made years later. Together the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants function as a unified whole to bring about “the promise,” that is, the fulfilling of all things in Messiah Yeshua.

Note carefully that the people of Israel who are restored and blessed in the *haftarah* are referred to as “a remnant” (v. 13): “The remnant of Israel will do no wrong and tell no lies, nor will a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths.” And notice how this remnant is described in v. 10: “From beyond the rivers of Ethiopia My worshipers, My dispersed ones, will bring My offerings.” The remnant of Israel is comprised of those who truly worship HaShem, which includes believers of the physical offspring of Abraham as well as those from the nations who have been grafted into the covenant. The common denominator of the remnant is that each one has exercised genuine faith in God and His Messiah. Thus, the manner in

which the promise of blessing to all the families of the earth is to be fulfilled is now plain to see. All who are of the faith of Abraham comprise the remnant, and the remnant is blessed by God with eternal salvation. This reminds us that God's saving work is grounded in His covenant promise.

The faith of the remnant has a single object: Yeshua, as our Apostolic passage makes clear. Paul enjoins upon the Roman community the same faith that Abraham and David had, a faith that laid hold of the promise of salvation in Yeshua. This faith, itself a gift of God, is the result of the work of the Spirit within the heart of the elect to bring them to rely, not upon their own abilities nor their ethnicity (flesh), but upon God's provision of atonement in Messiah. Thus, Abraham believed before being circumcised, meaning that from the perspective of the rabbis in Paul's day, he was pronounced righteous by God while reckoned as a Gentile. He therefore stands as the father of all those chosen from the nations to believe. But Abraham obeyed God and received the sign of the covenant, "a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised." That is, obedience to God's commands is the sure mark of those who have genuine faith. This accords with the words of Yeshua: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments" (John 14:15). John reiterates the same teaching: "For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (1Jn 5:3).

It is no wonder, then, that Paul latched onto Gen 15:6 as a cornerstone of the gospel he preached to the Gentiles. Salvation is to be found only in the fulfillment of the covenant made to Abraham. All who are truly born from above become members of the covenant with Abraham, and thus participate in the blessings God has made to him and to his descendants. Or another way to say this is: all who are saved by God's grace have Abraham as their father. Covenant membership in Abraham's covenant is not some side benefit of those who are saved—it is the very foundation of their salvation. This is why Paul can refer to the promise made to Abraham as the gospel (Gal 3:8), and why he considers it of prime importance to recognize Abraham as the father of all who believe.

Note one other important thing taught by our Apostolic reading: to have one's sins covered is one and the same with being reckoned as righteous. We see this by Paul's brief commentary on Ps 32:1–2 in Rom 4:6. He describes the Psalmist's words this way: "David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works." But David wrote "How blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity." We learn from this that those whose sins are forgiven are also those to whom the Lord credits righteousness. Righteousness in God's eyes is the result of being forgiven and not something earned by *mitzvot*.

Understanding salvation to be based upon the Abrahamic covenant has wide ramifications. Instead of seeing the modern Church as the locus of God's salvific work, Paul considers the ancient covenant made with Abraham and his descendants as the focal point of God's eternal plan of salvation. With this in mind, it is clear that anti-Semitism is antithetical to the gospel. Moreover, replacement theology (supersessionism) is likewise contrary to the gospel, for salvation in Messiah does not bring about the replacement of Israel, but rather is built upon her ultimate and final redemption. Thus, in Romans 11, Paul sees the ingathering of the Gentiles to faith, not as a "new Israel," but as the necessary means by which God will show Himself faithful to wayward Israel. In view of the mysterious and complex means by which God will fulfill His covenant to Abraham, Paul concludes:

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen" (Rom 11:33-36).