

IS IT THE CASE THAT CHRIST IS THE SAME OBJECT OF
FAITH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?
(GENESIS 15:1–6)

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Some Christian believers at times boldly announce that the method by which persons were converted in the OT (and therefore the method that is now available to pagans everywhere who are outside of Christ, but who want to believe) has a different object of faith from that which is described in the NT. Perhaps one of the most forthright examples of such a distinction in the doctrine of salvation between the two Testaments comes from the pen of Charles Ryrie. In 1965, he taught:

The *basis* of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* of salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age [however,] is God; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations.¹

But does the content of faith change for each age or group of people? Is that what the Scriptures expressly teach? That is the issue we wish to investigate here.

Over against the dispensational view is the covenantal view as set forth in the Westminster Confession (Chapter VII, section 3):

Man, by his Fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.

Covenant theology, then, makes the object of faith in both Testaments the same content: it is faith in Messiah, rather than a general trust or belief in God. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, contend that “it is historically impossible that the Old Testament saints should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the lamb of God, and that [they understood that] the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ.” Such a view of the Messiah is, in their thought, a “historically impossible anachronism.”² Of course, it is impossible if all of those features included in that OT definition of truth belief are comprehensively the same as those included in the content of faith in the Messiah as taught in the NT. But the tension is still there even when these matters are correctly sorted out.

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¹ Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 23 (emphasis original).

² Charles C. Ryrie, *The Grace of God* (Chicago: Moody, 1963) 45.

Therefore, the debate here is not over the place or the primacy of faith in salvation over all the ages of time, for all sides agree that faith is the same in the OT as it was in the NT and as it is today. But the area of contention is on the topic of the *object* or *person* to whom that faith is directed in the OT. And the passage where this issue is joined best is in Gen 15:6: “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”

Ryrie explained:

The object of Abraham’s faith, as here set forth, was not *the promise which appears as the occasion of its exercise*, what it rested on was God himself and that not merely as the giver of the promise here recorded, but as His servant’s shield and exceeding great reward. Abraham’s faith was in God, *not in the contents of the Abrahamic covenant*.³

But why must we make a division between the contents of the promise of God, which obviously includes the person of the Messiah as that coming Seed and set that over against a general belief in God himself? There is an acknowledgment here by Ryrie that the promise is indeed the “occasion of the exercise [of Abraham’s faith]” in this passage. Why insist that the object of faith not be “in the contents of the Abrahamic covenant?” especially since that was the “occasion” for his faith? Ryrie seems to concede the point he disallows.

Consequently, it will be necessary for us to take a closer look at Gen 15:1–6 to see which of these two views is correct, for the question is all the more important in a day like ours when the argument is made for a general inclusivism of all mortals in God’s gracious plan of salvation who perhaps merely become theists supposedly just as Abraham became.

Some have gone beyond Ryrie as they have applied such logic to the question of “Are the pagans saved who only believe that there must be a God somewhere?” For these debaters, the argument goes something like this: If Abram merely went outside, looked up at the stars at God’s command, and concluded that there must be a God somewhere who is the author of all the starry heavens, and God approved and thereby accepted Abram on that basis as a redeemed person, then by the same logic, could not the hidden peoples, or pagans of our day, who have never heard of the Messiah through no fault of their own, on the same basis as what we have just observed Abram demonstrate, likewise be offered some type of specially discounted terms for their salvation as well—those who were or are now “informationally BC” but “chronologically AD”?⁴ Could they not be given an exceptionally easy pass into God’s salvation by simply saying, “I believe there is a God!” “I am a theist!” But is this a valid way to become a true believer? Some evangelicals have argued precisely in this manner. Therefore, let us search the commentaries to see if they can enlighten us further on this topic.

³ Ibid. (emphasis added).

⁴ These terms come from Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) 254. Also, see my chapter “Holy Pagans: Reality or Myth?” in *Faith Comes by Hearing: A Response to Inclusivism* (ed. Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008) 123–41.

I. GENESIS 15:6: VARIOUS COMMENTATORS' VIEWS

It is surprising to see the breadth of meaning given to this text in the commentaries. One would think that Gen 15:6 would make the strongest possible case that the object of an OT person's faith was no less than the person referred to in the promise as the "Seed" who was to come, who was previously announced in Gen 3:15 and further described in Gen 9:27 and 12:2–3.⁵ But let us look at what others have said first. In fact, the whole story of salvation was built around these high points in history.

But some see it differently. For example, Allen P. Ross agrees, apparently as Charles Ryrie had, that on the surface it appears as if Abram's faith in verse 6 was the result of and was grounded on God's assurance of his promise in verses 1–5 in chapter 15. But Ross concluded that a study of the Hebrew verb (*wēhe'ēmīn*) is not the normal sequential construction ("And Abram believed"), but it is the perfect tense with the *waw* prefixed instead of the *waw* conjunction with the Hebrew imperfect form of the verb. On this observation, so far, we agree with Ross. However, Ross took this to mean that this text may not indicate that Abram came to faith at this point, for Heb 11:8 asserted that he had come to faith already when he left Ur in Gen 12:1.⁶ Therefore, this text merely reports that Abram had previously believed and for that belief in God, God had credited him with righteousness. Disappointingly, however, Ross concluded that that was not the writer's wish, but instead he wanted to show a break in the narrative in order to say another thing about Abram after he had noted the promise given in verses 1–5.

In line with this same understanding of this text is the opinion of T. V. Farris, who was even more emphatic. He wrote:

Verse 6, following immediately [vv. 2–5], would suggest that Abraham's faith was *in response to the preceding promise* [about God's provision of a "Seed"]. The syntactical form of the verb "believed," however, *precludes* that interpretation. The precise nuance of the syntax formula used in this instance, the conjunction *waw* plus a [Hebrew hiphil] perfect form of the verb, is a matter of dispute among grammarians.⁷

The Lutheran commentator H. C. Leupold also acknowledged that the form of the perfect verb with the *waw* was indeed unusual, yet this must have been the device by which the author indicated the *permanence* of this attitude of belief; not just that Abram believed once, but that he was constant in his faith, which also ruled out all efforts to attain anything by contributing some type of work on Abram's part to gain this gift from God.

Leupold went on to ask,

⁵ See my chapter in *Recovering the Unity of the Bible: One Continuous Story, Plan and Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 169–81, entitled "The Unity of the Bible and the Doctrine of Salvation in Both Testaments," which is a reworking of my article "Salvation in the Old Testament with Special Emphasis on the Object and Content of Personal Belief," *Jian Dao: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 2 (1994) 1–18.

⁶ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 309–10.

⁷ T. V. Farris, *Mighty to Save: A Study in Old Testament Soteriology* (Nashville: Broadman, 1993) 76–77 (emphasis added).

Is Abram's faith different from the justifying faith of the New Testament believer? We answer unhesitatingly and emphatically, No. The very issue in this chapter had been Abram's seed. But Abram cannot as a spiritual man have thought of this seed only as numerous descendants; for already in 12:3b that seed had been shown as involving one who would bring salvation to mankind ("all families of the earth blessed"). How could Abram have overlooked or undervalued this chief item? The remark of Hunnius (quoted by Delitzsch) certainly is correct: . . . Abram believed that God would send this Savior for his own good as well as for the whole world. Naturally, however, such faith may not possess full understanding of the details of redemptive work and the atoning sacrifice. Yet in essence it is trust in the Savior sent by God.⁸

Accordingly, Martin Luther also had expressed the same view when he wrote:

No one has treated this text [15:6] more fully, clearly and convincingly than did St. Paul in Romans, chapters 4–11. There he shows that this promise concerning the seed must not be understood of the temporal, or bodily, seed (Abraham's bodily descendants), but of the one that is spiritual and eternal. . . . When Moses says that Abraham "believed in the Lord," this is the first time the Holy Scripture expressly speaks of his faith. Other passages, which Moses mentioned before, demanded faith, as, for example, the promise concerning the Seed of the Woman, but they do not so glorify faith as the one with which we are dealing.⁹

We conclude that the unusual Hebrew form of the Hiphil perfect tense with the *naw* preformative was used not to start a new subject, but to indicate the *permanence* of Abram's belief. And what Abram placed his faith in was the *content of the promise* made originally in Gen 12:2–3, which focused on the Seed, or the Messiah who was to come. As a result, God added this up and credited this belief to Abram's account as one who was "righteousness" (Gen 15:6b).

II. THE "FAITH PRINCIPLE" AS AN ANOTHER ALTERNATIVE OBJECT OF FAITH

What, then, is the faith that saves, that is, the basis or grounds for saving faith? The answers of the inclusivists (who have a very broad basis for folks being saved) and exclusivists (who argue for a distinctive faith in Christ alone) differ widely. For example, one of the favorite texts of inclusivists is Heb 11:6: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him." So what is meant by this verse? Is it as the inclusivists define faith as merely a generic faith response, that is, a general seeking after God, or is a faith centered uniquely in Jesus Christ?

Clark Pinnock first defined this new "faith principle" in this way:

In my judgment, the faith principle is the basis of universal accessibility. According to the Bible, people are saved by faith, not by the content of their theology. Since God has not left anyone without witness, people are judged on the light they have received and how they have responded to that light. Faith in God is what saves, not possessing certain minimum information. Hebrews is clear:

⁸ H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953) 477–78.

⁹ Martin Luther, *Luther's Commentary on Genesis*. Trans. J. Theodore Mueller, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958) 264 (first emphasis mine, the second one his).

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Heb 11:6)¹⁰

To derive an alleged doctrine of a “faith principle” from Heb 11:6 fails to note that the book of Hebrews, as with the rest of the Bible, places such calls for faith in the contexts of the promise-plan of God (e.g. Heb 11:9, 11, 13, 17, 39). Thus the object of their faith was a special revelation as the opening words of this book (1:1–2) announced. God had indeed spoken by the prophets in the past by means of many ways and times, but he had now in these last days spoken unto us by his Son Jesus Christ. Moreover, while Heb 11:6 points to the necessity of faith, it is not given as an exhaustive statement of all the Bible has to say on the topic. Many in the days of our Lord here on earth more than satisfied the inclusivist’s faith principle, but when some of them, such as Saul of Tarsus were converted, they often spoke of the vast difference between what they had previously thought they had and the salvation they now possessed. The so-called “faith principle” just does not measure up to the full teaching of the word of God.

III. “THE MELCHIZEDEK FACTOR”

Others have tried other ways to see more people included in the kingdom of God. For example, Don Richardson wrote a famous book entitled *Eternity in their Hearts* in which he used the “Melchizedek Factor” from Genesis 14 as a representative of a believer in *general revelation*, which he set over against the “Abrahamic Factor”¹¹ to signify those who believed in the contents of the promise plan of God as the object of faith. Richardson argued that since Melchizedek is called greater than Abraham in Heb 7:1–7, therefore he judged that general revelation that goes out to all peoples on earth was greater than special revelation that came to a lesser number of people through the Scriptures. But Richardson made this distinction as an assumption, for we do not know how Melchizedek came to know of Yahweh, the Creator of heaven and earth. But as Jonathan Edwards suggested more appropriately, Melchizedek “could have been saved through the traces of original [special] revelation that still remained among his people.”¹² This solution, as argued by Pinnock and others, did not appear to advance a wider basis for belief than the content of the promise-plan of God. Moreover, general revelation is indeed taught in Scripture, but special revelation is granted superiority because it explains what words, events and happenings mean. One may have the disclosure of persons and also events, but it is the interpretation and significance of those persons or events that is crucial in special revelation.

¹⁰ Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God’s Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 157–58.

¹¹ Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts* (2d ed.; Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984). See a fair critique of this book by Tite Tienou, “Eternity in Their Hearts,” in *Through No Fault of their Own? The Fate of Those who have Never Heard* (ed. James Sigountos and William Crockett; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991) 209–15.

¹² Jonathan Edwards, “History of Redemption,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (ed. Harry S. Stout; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 9:179, as cited by Terrance L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved? Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 171.

Others have appealed, on a similar basis, to the case of Jethro, the “priest of Midian” (Exod 18:1), as an example of another “holy pagan,” whom Moses met after he fled from Pharaoh in Egypt. But once again, even though Jethro appears to be both a Gentile and a full believer in Yahweh, we are not told either just how he came to faith. Was he also an inheritor of the traces of an original revelation that God had given at the very beginning of time? We do know for sure that Jethro’s household went on believing, for his son Hobab led Israel in her wilderness wanderings (Num 10:29–32), and six hundred years later King Ahab exterminated the worshippers of Baal with the help of Jehonadab, son of Rechab, also one of Jetho’s later descendants (2 Kgs 10:15–25). In another 300 years after that date, in Jeremiah 35, the Rechabites are depicted as still adhering to the ancient command of their forbearers, and the word of God, as they were gathered by Jeremiah in the house of God and offered wine under directions from the Lord. This wine they solemnly refused, for they had anciently made a promise not to build houses for themselves, not to plant vineyards for personal use, or drink of its fruit.

We do know that Jethro was used, with what appears to be divine approval, as an efficiency expert for Moses as he laid a plan to divide up the counseling load for Moses so that neither he nor the people of Israel should be wearied of each other (Exodus 19). Some might want to call Jethro a “holy pagan,” but he certainly appears to enjoy full fellowship with the people of God as they worship with their sacrifices. This would seem to indicate that he confessed the same coming Seed or Messiah of Israel before he met Moses.

IV. OTHER FAMOUS GENTILES WHO BELIEVED

The case of Balaam, son of Beor, is at once most interesting and most puzzling. Balaam’s home, according to Num 22:5, was in “Pethor, which is near the River [Euphrates], in his native land,” presumably where the Kurds of today live. Traditionally Pethor has been located on the west bank of the Euphrates about twelve miles from Carchemish. A most surprising fragmentary inscription, known as the Deir ‘Allah Inscription, was found on March 17, 1967, some twenty miles north of where Israel had camped in the Plains of Moab in Transjordan. The Inscription is written in black and red ink on a plaster wall and usually dated to somewhere around 850 BC, apparently as a writing exercise for pupils a good many years after the time of Balaam (who lived around 1400 BC).

The inscription agrees that Balaam was called a “seer” (hōzeh), which was the older name in Israel for a “prophet.” It also noted that Balaam received a divine communication at night and that the people of Moab received a curse rather than an expected blessing from Balaam and the Lord. Balaam has left a long trail of mention throughout Scripture (Num 31:8–16; Deut 23:5–6; Josh 13:22; 24:9–10; Mic 6:5; 2 Pet 2:15; Jude 11; Rev 2:14). So the question remains: was Balaam a saint or an unsaved sinner?

The data seem to fit the explanation given by the famous William Foxwell Albright. He decided that Balaam must have become “a convert to Yahwehism, and that he later abandoned Israel’s cause to join the Midianites in fighting against

the Yahwists.”¹³ Once again, we cannot say where, or how, Balaam came in contact with the good news about the Messiah, but his reputation for being a prophet of the Lord was known far and wide in that day, for that is why the King of Moab sent for him over several hundred miles away. The fact that he had an inglorious end does cast him in a final negative light, but that does not directly reflect on the legitimacy of his salvation, if he indeed did believe. In his prophecies, he spoke boldly and correctly about the coming Messiah to the glory of God.

Another person who is listed as a candidate for the status of “holy pagan” is Rahab the harlot (Josh 2:1). True, she did hide the spies. True, she did straightforwardly lie about what she had done to the messengers sent to her by the king of Jericho. But she also, like many redeemed sinners today, gave a brilliant testimony in Josh 2:9–11 to God’s saving grace.

She praised God for what he had done for Israel at the Red Sea and for what he had done to the two kings of the Amorites across the Jordan River. He was the God in heaven above and on earth beneath, and he was the one who had given to Israel the land they were about to conquer. But how did she know these things, and how did they lead to a confession of Messiah as that coming Seed? The only clue we are given is that she is entered into the Hall of Faith in Heb 11:31. Even more convincing is the word from Jas 2:25, where James taught: “In the same way [that Abram was justified by faith in the coming Seed], was not even Rehab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction?” Her confession was judged to be real by her actions.

If a woman of this unsavory character troubles you as being accounted as righteous before God, let us be reminded that she became the wife of a prince in Judah named Salmon, and thus was the one through whom the promised line of Messiah came as well (Matt 1:4–6; cf. Ruth 4:18–22; Num 7:12).

Once again, it becomes critically important to realize that the object of Abram’s faith was the Seed, just as it was important in James’ epistle to realize that Rahab’s faith rested where Abram’s faith rested as well. If we err in exegeting Gen 15:6, the trickle-down effect can be seen all the way into the NT and the life of one such as Rahab.

The final OT person we would examine is Naaman, the Syrian general, who also appears to be a convert to the faith in Messiah. God used the witness of a captured Jewish maiden to point this commander of the hostile army of Syria to go to Elisha the prophet in Samaria, Israel, which he had previously been attacking (2 Kgs 5:3). Accordingly, hearing that there was a prophet in Israel who could cure his leprosy, he asked his king, Ben Hadad to give a letter for him to take to the king of northern Israel, King Joram, to heal him of his disease (dated c. 852–841 BC).

¹³ William Foxwell Albright, “The Oracles of Balaam,” *JBL* 63 (1944) 233. See also Walter C. Kaiser Jr., “Balaam, Son of Beor, in Light of Deir ‘Allah and Scripture: Saint or Soothsayer?” in *Go to the Land I Will Show You: Dwight Young Festschrift* (ed. Joseph Coleson and Victor Matthews; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 95–106.

Naaman was a “highly regarded” and “valiant soldier” (2 Kgs 5:1). Yet even more astonishing is the fact that Yahweh had given victory to Syria over Israel (2 Kgs 5:1), yet Naaman was now asking for a favor from the same ruler whom he had defeated just recently. No wonder there was alarm in Israel. But Elisha heard of the commotion and volunteered to help.

Elisha did not go to greet Naaman, but simply sent word for him to go and dip seven times in the Jordan River. Naaman almost defaulted on following through on such a strange order, except for the urging of his servants (2 Kgs 5:14). As a result of his going down into the dirty waters of the Jordan seven times, his skin was made clean as that of a young boy. He therefore made three requests of the prophet Elisha: (1) could he take back two mule loads of Israelite soil so he could stand on good grounds when he worshipped Yahweh; (2) could he also use the dirt as a foundation for offering burnt offerings and sacrifices to Yahweh; and (3) could he be forgiven when he had to accompany King Ben Hadad into the temple and kneel before the god Rimmon, the chief god of Syria, since it was part of his official duties as commander to accompany the king? Elisha did not fuss with him over nuances in theology at this point, but gave him permission to return and act as he had requested.

Did Naaman come to real faith in the Seed? Though we are not told, the impact of the result on his life seemed to indicate that something real had taken place.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Gentiles were brought to faith in the OT, for that had been in the purpose of God’s promise-plan in Gen 12:3. Though not every case is a clear statement that the object of faith was the Seed/Messiah, Gen 15:6 is clear enough to state this was the way of salvation in the OT.

The only alternative to the demand that faith must rest exclusively in the Seed/Messiah is to adopt a theory of two methods of salvation: one in the OT and the other in the NT. Most of the believers who came to faith before NT times are those who give evidence that their faith was based on the God who disclosed himself in the Seed of Woman. However, to equate modern minimalist pagans, as inclusivists do, with the so-called “holy pagans” of the OT, fails to note that these OT examples of Gentiles who came to faith were responding to special revelation and were not merely exercising some kind of general faith in an unidentified God whom they discovered in nature or in general revelation.