

As It Is Written

The Christian understanding of Genesis 15:6 is that God Abram is justified (deemed righteous) on the basis faith¹, not any deed on his part. This understanding can be traced to St. Paul's reading of the Septuagint's translation of the Hebrew of Genesis 15:6. St. Paul quotes Genesis 15:6 in a number of places², but Romans 4:3 is typical:

For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (NRS)

For comparison, here's Brenton's English translation of Romans 4:3 from the Septuagint,

And Abram believed God, and it was countedⁱ to him for righteousnessⁱⁱ.

You can see at once that Paul has correctly, if not exactly, quoted the Septuagint's text. A straightforward reading of the English translation of the Septuagint is unambiguous (but incorrect as will be shown below). God imputes righteousness to Abram because of Abram's belief in the truth of God's promise for descendants "as numerous as the stars".

All English Bibles, as far as I can tell, translate Genesis 15:6 to mean that Abram was deemed righteous because of his trust/belief in God's promises. The NRS translation of Genesis 15:6 is even more clear. In their translation, they add "the LORD"³ as the subject of 'reckoned'.

"And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Again, as for the Septuagint, a straightforward reading of the NRS translation unambiguously supports Paul's interpretation that Abram was deemed righteous by Abram's willingness to place his faith in God.

The KJV's translation of 15:6, by contrast, is somewhat less explicit. The KJV translators chose to insert the indefinite personal pronoun 'he' (colored red, below) as the subject of 'counted'. Here is the KJV's translation:

*"And he believed in the LORD; and **he** counted it to him for righteousness."*

The use of 'he' introduces grammatical ambiguity into the verse because, written this

¹ Among the more well-known Jewish scholars this claim is arguable. Rashi agrees with the Christian interpretation, Rambam disagrees arguing, as does this essay, that Abram is praising God's righteousness.

² See, for example, Romans 4:20, Galatians 3:6, and James 2:23.

³ The phrase, "The LORD", does not appear in the underlying Hebrew.

way, the antecedent⁴ of ‘he’ can be either Abram or God. Now, the KJV translation is not alone in using ‘he’. In fact, most English Biblesⁱⁱⁱ also have added ‘he’ to the translation as the subject of the second verb.

There is, however, an alternative understanding of this verse. An understanding that runs counter to Christian tradition (and Paul’s interpretation) and, moreover, has the merit of being consistent with the actual Hebrew text upon which both English and Greek translations are ultimately based^{iv}. So, let’s take a careful look at the actual Hebrew text of this verse.

For context, in the previous verse, Genesis15:5, God makes a promise to Abram that Abram’s descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky. Upon hearing this, the Hebrew Bible records Abram’s response as follows (read from right-to-left):

צְדָקָה	לוֹ	וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ	בַּיהוָה	וְהֵאֱמַן
righteousness	to-him	and-reckoned-it ⁵	in-the-LORD	“Then-he-believed
<i>Tzə·da·qah</i>	<i>llo</i>	<i>vay·yach·shə·ve·ha</i>	<i>ba·Yahweh</i>	<i>və·he·eh·min</i>

Note carefully that a direct translation of the Hebrew text contains no added words such as “The LORD”, “he”, etc. Indeed, when compared to the direct translation of the actual Hebrew, St. Paul’s understanding is wrong (see below). In fact, the plain text of the Hebrew reveals that Abram reckons to God righteousness, not the other way around as is commonly understood. The rest of this paper explains why but will require two grammar rules. The first rule applies strictly to Hebrew in that a single Hebrew word often is translated into two or more English words. The second is a simple rule governing how the subject of a verb is determined.

Take for example, the third Hebrew word, *vayyachshəveha*, which is translated using four English words, “*and-[he]-reckoned-it*”. Now, *vayyachshəveha* is a third person, masculine, singular verb for which the subject pronoun, ‘he’ is implied when it is not made explicit. This is why the English translators of most commercial Bibles (e.g., the KJV) added ‘he’ to the English translation which then would read, “*and-he-reckoned-it*”. But, the use of ‘he’ introduces an ambiguity that does not exist in the Hebrew as written in this verse^v. By adding ‘he’, the subject of verb^r (‘reckoned’) can be either God or Abram. For example, compare the KJV’s translation with the direct (no added text) translation of the Hebrew (HEB):

(KJV) “*And he believed in the LORD; and **he** counted it to him for righteousness.*”

(HEB) “*Then he believed in the LORD and reckoned it to him righteousness.*”

⁴ That to which is referred. In other words, the antecedent of ‘he’ is the person ‘he’ refers to.

⁵ Other translations include counted, attributed, reckoned, thought, etc.

While the KJV's translation is ambiguous, the Hebrew version is not. The Hebrew version unambiguously expresses Abram as the verb's subject. The reason is simple and one you will recognize immediately in the following example:

Jim jogged through the park but walked home.

Jim is the subject of both verbs, 'jogged' and 'walked'. Here is another example more like Genesis 15:5-6:

*Jim's father, Mr. Anderson, promised his son a new car upon Jim's graduation.
Jim was very grateful and reckoned him to be generous.*

Again, in this example, Jim is the subject of both verbs, 'was' and 'reckoned'. The Hebrew of 15:6 is similarly constructed. The verse exists as two independent, but connected clauses of which only the first has an explicit subject. In such cases, both English and Hebrew grammars (and most other languages, by the way) require that the subject of the first clause also be the subject of the second^{vi}. Thus, Abram must be the subject of the second verb. To see this, here is the verse with all the subject pronouns fully expressed:

And Abram believed in the LORD and Abram counted it to the LORD as righteousness.

This verse, then, carries a simple, but theologically profound message: Abram finally comes to recognize God's righteousness^{vii} and that righteousness, in this context, is based on the faithfulness of God. God is faithful, believes Abram, and therefore righteous.

There is still an unresolved ambiguity, however – what is the antecedent of 'it' (colored red), as in the translation below?

*“And he believed in the LORD and counted **it** to him as righteousness.”*

The answer requires another small bit of Hebrew grammar. Like many other languages (but unlike English), Hebrew is inflected for gender. So, for example, Hebrew nouns and pronouns are either male, female, or neutral depending on to what or to whom they refer. In this verse, the pronoun 'it' is inflected as feminine and so must refer to a feminine noun. However, the only feminine noun in this verse is 'righteousness' which makes no sense. For example, when substituted for the pronoun, 'it':

*“And he believed in the LORD and counted **righteousness** to him as righteousness.”*

Such a translation is nonsense. So, what is its antecedent, i.e., to what noun does the

indefinite pronoun 'it' refer? The first clause gives us a clue when it states that Abram believed in God or to put it more explicitly, believed that God spoke the truth when He promised Abram's descendants to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. In Hebrew, the word for truth

(אֱמֶת (emet)) is feminine and so fits perfectly with the context and grammar of the verse. Using "the truth of God's promises" as the antecedent of 'it', we read,

"And he believed in the LORD and counted [the truth of God's promises] to Him as righteousness."

With this in mind, a straight forward, unadorned reading of 15:5-6, paraphrased for clarity but consistent with the Hebrew text (i.e., no added ambiguity), would read something like this...

5... "Look toward heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to Abram, "So shall your descendants be." 6Then⁶ Abram believed in the LORD and thought the truth of God's promises to be evidence of the LORD's righteousness.

How could St. Paul have made such an egregious error? Well, it turns out that the error was not his! It seems that the authors of the Septuagint made the same mistake as our Bible translators made 2400 years later. Here, again, is the English translation of the Septuagint's version of 15:6:

And Abram believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

This mistranslation arose because the Greek verb from which 'reckoned' is translated is in the passive voice (hence, "it was reckoned"). The underlying Hebrew verb from which the Greek was translated, however, is in the active voice. Constructed using the passive voice, the antecedent of 'it' must be God. The mistake was not St. Paul's. He simply quoted the Septuagint's mistranslation of 15:6.

Now, go and study.

⁶ I've used 'then' in the sense of 'therefore' because the Hebrew verb for 'believed' is in the Hiphil or causative stem. In other words, something caused "Abram to believe" – presumably the truth of what God had just promised.

End Notes

ⁱ The Septuagint's phrase, "it was counted", arises because the translators inexplicably used the passive voice of the Greek verb for counted (ἐλογίσθη) to translate the corresponding Hebrew verb, **וַיִּשְׁבַּח**, an active voice (i.e., Qal, waw consecutive).

ⁱⁱ If you're interested in the actual Greek, here is verse 15:6 from the Septuagint:

καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραμ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην

Brenton's translation (a.k.a., LXE) is, by all accounts, a very good representation of the Greek, if not the best. It certainly is the standard translation used in scholarly research.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example the list of English Bibles that are the result of a simple search at Bible Hub (<http://biblehub.com/genesis/15-6.htm>). The majority use the indefinite pronoun, but a significant minority use God, LORD, Jehovah, or Yahweh as its antecedent.

^{iv} Most English translations of Genesis 15:6 are derived from Paul's quoting of the Septuagint which, as we know, is the Greek translation of the ancient Hebrew text.

^v Hebrew, like English, has a perfectly good, explicit, and standalone word for the pronoun 'he'. Unlike the later translators of this verse, the Hebrew author chose NOT to use the pronoun. Presumably because of the grammatical ambiguity its use would have caused.

^{vi} Note that all English translations (of which I am aware) *insert* a semi-colon (or period) between the two clauses. By inserting punctuation separating the two clauses in this way, the multi-clause, single-subject rule is voided. But note: biblical Hebrew has no punctuation so the decision to add a semi-colon derives from the translator's bias.

^{vii} This is the first use of 'righteousness' in the Bible. It is fitting, therefore, that righteousness describes God, not the human, Abram.