

WHO COUNTED RIGHTEOUSNESS TO WHOM? TWO CLASHING VIEWS BY SHADAL ON GENESIS 15:6

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In memory of my father, Simcha Binyamin Klein z"l

In its remarkable succinctness, the Torah sometimes leaves us wondering how a brief word or phrase might have been fleshed out. Particularly mystifying are some verses in which a verb appears without a subject, or a pronoun is given without an antecedent. In such cases we must ask: About whom are we talking?

Sometimes, we may have to pick from as many as three possible candidates. In one of the most baffling passages in Exodus, *And it came to pass on the way at the lodging-place, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him* (Ex. 4:24), the intended victim is usually taken to be Moses. However, some have suggested that "him" refers instead to Moses' younger son Eliezer, who is about to undergo an impromptu circumcision, or else to Moses' older son Gershom, whose identity may be hinted at in the immediately preceding verse: *'And I have said unto thee: Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and thou hast refused to let him go. Behold, I will slay thy son, thy first-born.'*

Sometimes, the choice can theoretically be narrowed down to either-or, but the vagueness in the wording may be a deliberate literary ploy. When Judah eloquently pleads before Joseph to let Benjamin return to their father, he says, *'The lad cannot leave his father; for if he should leave his father, he would die'* (Gen. 44:22). Who would die? It must be either Benjamin or his father Jacob, and either choice may be plausibly defended – but why choose? Robert Alter may well be right in suggesting that "this is a studied ambiguity on Judah's part."¹

In one especially perplexing case we must make an either-or choice, and that choice is fraught with theological significance. God has just told Abram (whose name has not yet been changed to Abraham) that his posterity would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. We then read, *And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness* (Gen. 15:6). Who counted to whom?

There are several approaches one might take in attempting to solve this riddle. Obviously, the "he" who believed in the Lord was Abram, so it might appear likely that the next "he" refers to Abram as well.² In that case, Abram would be attributing righteousness to God. On the other hand, the second "he" directly follows "the Lord." Under the grammatical rule of thumb that a pronoun refers to the closest antecedent,³ it would appear that it was God who was attributing righteousness to Abram.

If we go beyond cold rules of grammar and consider the meaning of the verse, new arguments emerge on either side of the question. If we say (as did Nahmanides and Abravanel) that Abram counted it to the Lord for righteousness, we mean that Abram was so confident in God's promise of offspring that he counted that promise as a "righteous" one. Well and good, but one might ask what induced Abram to place such value on an as-yet unfulfilled promise. If, on the other hand, we maintain (as did Onkelos, Rashi, and Maimonides) that the Lord counted it to Abram for righteousness, we are saying that God characterized Abram's faith in Him as a "righteous" or meritorious mode of thought. This, too, seems to make sense, but is this idea really consonant with the root principles of the Jewish religion?

No, says Shadal (Samuel David Luzzatto - 1800-1865) in his comment on Genesis 15:6. Rejecting the view that the phrase in question means that "God deemed it a merit to Abram," Shadal declares that "the idea that faith should be deemed a 'merit' in a person is not only illogical, but contrary to the Torah and Prophets."⁴ Elsewhere in his writings, he expands on this concept:

Neither the prophets nor the Tannaim nor the Amoraim circumscribed matters of faith by saying that he who believes thus and thus or does not believe it is to be excluded from the community of Israel

. . . they judged every man according to his deeds⁵

Hence, says Shadal, Maimonides ought not to have restated the essence of Judaism in the form of Thirteen Articles of Faith. Apparently, Shadal does not mean to say that the Jewish religion lacks core beliefs. Rather, he implies that holding such beliefs, without more, is not a way to score points with the Lord or lead a righteous life.

There is, in fact, a religious system that has traditionally defined righteousness in terms of faith. That system is Christianity. As epitomized (unsympa-

thetically) by the French historian Jules Michelet, Christian doctrine teaches: "No righteousness without faith. Whoever does not believe is unrighteous. Is righteousness without faith of any use? No."⁶ In keeping with this teaching, the New Testament itself – apparently with our verse from Genesis in mind – states: "We say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness" (Romans 4:9). It is precisely this view from which Shadal recoiled.

Or did he? His own Italian translation of Genesis 15:6 (as translated, in turn, into English) reads: *He had faith in the Lord, and [He] deemed it to his merit*. In other words, Shadal's translation flatly contradicts his own commentary!⁷ How can we account for such a paradox?

Over the course of more than 50 years of exegetical activity, Luzzatto not infrequently reconsidered his early opinions and revised them. In particular, it seems that the task of preparing his Italian translation of the Torah text in 1858 spurred a good deal of such rethinking. Sometimes he explicitly says so in his commentary,⁸ but in other instances – as in our Genesis 15:6 – he leaves his thought process unexplained, and his commentary unrevised.

And yet there is outside evidence indicating that this, too, is one of those verses about whose meaning Shadal the translator had a change of heart. In a letter to the Hebrew-language weekly *Ha-Maggid* (note the date: July 7, 1858), he provided the following explanation:

Expressing opposing views on this phrase are seven shepherds and eight princes of men. Onkelos, Rashi, Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*, part 3, ch. 53), Kimhi, Albo in *Ikkarim* (Part 3, ch. 21), Sforno, Mendelssohn, and Reggio were of the view that God deemed it a merit to Abram, while R. Joseph Bekhor Shor, Nahmanides, Gersonides, Abravanel, the author of the *Akedah* [R. Isaac Arama], the author of *Toledot Yitzhak* [R. Isaac ben Joseph Caro], and the author of *Ma'asei Adonai* [R. Eliezer ben Elijah Ashkenazi] interpreted the phrase to mean that Abram attributed justice to the Holy One, blessed is He. And I, for the past 32 years . . . held to the second opinion, but today, 4 Tammuz 5618 [1858], I revert to the view of Onkelos and Rashi, which also appears in a Greek translation and is the view of Christian scholars, both ancient and modern, and which, moreover, is the simple meaning of the verse and the import of its language. Compare *And that* [Phinehas' action] *was*

counted to him for righteousness (Ps. 106:31): that is, God deemed it to Phinehas as a merit for which he would receive a reward throughout the generations. Since we find this expression used with reference to God establishing a reward for a person, it is unlikely that the same expression should be used in connection with a person's attitude toward God

The meaning is that God caused Abram, upon hearing the promise *So shall thy seed be* [Gen. 15:5], to feel a powerful faith in His words, and then He continued to speak with him with great affection [culminating in the "covenant between the pieces," Genesis 15:9-21], in order to demonstrate to him that He deemed this faith of his as a merit.⁹

Why, then, did Luzzatto not change his commentary to conform to his 1858 translation? Apparently, he never had the opportunity. Although he had planned to issue a revised and expanded version of his 1846 commentary (*Ha-Mishtadel*), the Genesis portion of the new version did not appear until 1871, six years after his death, and did not benefit from a thorough and consistent editing by the author.¹⁰

What we are left with is a tantalizing puzzle, not unlike the M. C. Escher lithograph of two artists' hands that seem to be drawing each other. Is God accounting righteousness to Abram, or is Abram accounting righteousness to God? There are valid reasons both to accept and to reject each alternative. If pressed to choose, however, I would tend to be swayed by the literary argument based on the verse from Psalms, where God accounts righteousness to Phinehas. I would thus be siding with Rashi and the eight princes, rather than Nahmanides and the seven shepherds. But if you ask me tomorrow, I may not give the same answer.

NOTES

1. R. Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York and London: Norton, 1996) p. 264.
2. It should be noted that in the original Hebrew, *ve-he'emin ba-adonai va-yahshevehah lo tzedakah*, no equivalent of the pronoun "he" actually appears; there are merely two verbs in the masculine singular form. However, the pronoun "him [lo]" does appear.
3. See, for example, L. Kip Wheeler, "Unclear Pronoun Antecedents," http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/gram_pronoun_unclear.html.

4. S. D. Luzzatto, *The Book of Genesis: A Commentary by Shadal*, trans. D. A. Klein (Northvale, NJ and Jerusalem: Jason Aronson, 1998) p. 145.
5. *Kerem Hemed* 3, p. 70, cited in M. B. Margolies, *Samuel David Luzzatto: Traditionalist Scholar* (New York: Ktav, 1979) p. 162.
6. J. Michelet, *Historical View of the French Revolution, From Its Earliest Indications to the Flight of the King in 1791*, trans. C. Cocks (London, H. G. Bohn, 1864) p. 19.
7. Although the translation originally appeared separately, in S. D. Luzzatto, *Il Pentateuco colle Hajarot volgarizzato* (Trieste: Colombo Coen, 1858-1860), it was printed together with his Hebrew commentary in S. D. Luzzatto, *Il Pentateuco volgarizzato e commentato* (Padua: Francesco Sacchetto, 1871-1876). The English version of Shadal's translation of Genesis 15:6 appears in Luzzatto, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 144.
8. See, for example, Shadal's commentary on Genesis 36:43: "All the translators and commentators have interpreted the word *allufim* as 'princes' or 'rulers,' and so I translated and interpreted this word until today. But now, in Tishrei 5819 (1858), as I am occupied with the correction of my translation in order to send it to the printer . . ., I see that it is more correct and logical to say that the meaning of *alluf* is not 'prince' or 'ruler,' but rather 'clan' or 'tribe.' (Luzzatto, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 346).
9. See Luzzatto, *The Book of Genesis*, pp. 145-146, n. 5.
10. Note, however, that in some instances Shadal did succeed in reconciling his commentary with his changed translation, as in the case of the word *alluf* in Gen. 36:43 (see note 8 above).



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