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# **Genesis 15:6: New Covenant Expositions of an Old Covenant Text\***

**O. Palmer Robertson**

Paralleling the current crescendo of interest in hermeneutics has been a developing consciousness of the treatment of the Old Testament by the New. For some, honest interaction between these two areas cannot fail but establish the absurdity of attempting to learn from the New Testament how to go about interpreting the Old in a modern context. Other scholars of international renown have concluded that the New Testament treatment of the Old provides the very “substructure of New Testament theology.”<sup>2</sup>

No short-cut methodology can resolve the question of the relevance of hermeneutical methods exercised within the New Testament for current questions of biblical interpretation. As a matter of fact, affirmations or denials concerning the “normative” character of the hermeneutic inherent in the New Testament have questionable value. For it generally would have to be

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admitted that a praxical grasp of New Testament ways of interpretation hardly exists. To this point, it is even unclear as to whether one should speak of a “method” or of “methods” of interpretation in the New Testament.

Portals to a noble task now swing open to the biblical exegete. Over the next decades attention must focus on the very practical task of analyzing those Old Testament passages which themselves are the subject of New Testament interpretation. It is not as though these materials have not been investigated by the church previously. But current concentration on the hermeneutical question demands fresh investigation in the light of present problems. At the same time, the atmosphere of the hour provides a catalyst which may lead the church into deeper appreciation of older assumptions, and into heightened visions of the grandeur of God’s truth.

The present study intends to focus on Genesis 15:6 as a pivotal passage which receives extensive treatment in new covenant scriptures. Explicitly quoted by two different authors of new covenant documents, this text affects major questions of theological orientation both in the Old Testament and in the New. We shall consider first the function of Genesis 15:6 in the context of old covenant forms. Then we shall analyze the “fulfillment” of Genesis 15:6 in the light of new covenant realities.

## **I. The Function of Genesis 15:6 in the Context of Old Covenant Forms**

### **A. Preliminary Considerations**

Before analyzing the message of Genesis 15:6 itself, some remarks of a preliminary nature must be offered. These remarks relate to the context in which the affirmation of Genesis 15:6 is found, and to questions concerning the distinctive form of the verse.

#### **1. Context**

The context of Genesis 15:6 is familiar to the general reader. The patriarch Abraham had been called sovereignly into covenant relationship, although residing in a context of idol-worship

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(*cf.* Josh. 24:2). He had been given rather spectacular promises concerning his unique function among humanity, for in him all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. However, he now labors under a peculiarly severe weight of non-fulfillment of the divine promise. He does not possess the land, and God has not given him a seed.

God responds in Genesis 15 to the plaint of the patriarch by the formal establishment of a covenant relationship. Employing the then-current procedures for covenant ratification, the Lord pledges by oath of self-malediction to fulfill all the promises previously made and now reiterated.

Genesis 15:6 relates specifically to the divine promise concerning the multiplication of Abraham's seed. The patriarch is quite willing to substitute the servant of his house for an authentic son. But the Lord insists that one born from his own loins shall be his heir, despite Abraham's inability to produce naturally. Ultimately his own seed shall be as the stars of the heavens in number (Gen. 15:4, 5).

In response to this particular promise concerning God's intervention in providing a seed where human instrumentality has proven incapable, Abraham "believed God." This faith God "reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6).

## **2. Form**

Several options arise in considering the precise form of Genesis 15:6. The theological dramaticness of the declaration forces serious consideration of this question.

Notice the utter scepticism concerning the content of the entirety of the patriarchal narrative based on conclusions respecting form as expressed by Julius Wellhausen:

It is true, we attain to no historical knowledge of the patriarchs, but only of the time when the stories about them arose in the Israelite people; this later age is here unconsciously projected, in its inner and its outward features, into hoar antiquity, and is reflected there like a glorified mirage.

According to Wellhausen, absolutely nothing may be learned about Abraham, his faith or his relation to God from

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Genesis 15:6. Instead, the form as well as the content of these words was determined by the theological concerns of a generation living approximately 1200 years after the probable dating of Abraham.

Gerhard von Rad is more generous in granting some historical authenticity to the narrative of Genesis 15. Yet he concludes on the basis of considerations of form that although verses 7–18 "are perhaps ancient tradition from the patriarchal period itself," verses 1–6 "are quite theologically reflective and derive from a period when matters of faith were a problem." Although he decides that a satisfactory source analysis seems "absolutely impossible," he feels comfortable in affirming that the narrative of Genesis 15:1–6 reflects forms of discourse which "unquestionably derive from the sphere of the cult." The affirmation that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness is treated as a theological reflection of the narrator. These words communicate theological opinions which may have special significance for readers contemporary with the narrator.

Following a similar line, Ronald E. Clements classifies Genesis 15:1–6 among those passages of the Old Testament highlighting the theme of the divine promise. He regards it as very unsatisfactory to attempt to deal with such faith-affirmations from the perspective of a single historical context, since succeeding Israelite

generations have re-appropriated such affirmations of faith for their own age. In an earlier work, Clements had suggested that all three of the major promises which appear in the Abrahamic covenant must be seen as arising out of the political situation of the Davidic epoch. In particular, the promise of the “seed” developed from the reality of a national entity which had been formed under the monarchy.<sup>7</sup>

But viewing scripture in its covenantal form as sealing the commitments of a Lord with integrity provides a viable alternative to historically relativizing the faith-affirmation of Genesis 15:6. The new covenant documents themselves insist on this

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integrity by building theological structures on historical affirmations inherent in the old covenant documents. The significance of this particular factor in the New Testament interpretation of this passage will become apparent subsequently when Paul’s analysis of the significance of Abraham’s justification in relation to his circumcision is considered.

One recent analysis of Genesis 15:6 discovers inherently in the grammatical structures of the text itself strong reason for reading Genesis 15:6 in terms of the objective historical experience of the patriarch himself. According to this interpretation, the affirmation that Abraham “believed in Yahveh” (האמן ביהוה) does not provide insight primarily into the internal soul-response of the patriarch to the promise of God. Instead, the verb translated “he believed” (האמן) has a “delocutive” function. The statement that Abraham “believed” describes a circumstance in which the patriarch openly declared his “Amen” to the promise of God.

Apparently context and grammatical construction in the Old Testament suggest occasions in which a particular phrase may refer to a spoken formula or stock phrase that has been verbalized. The phrase “he is righteous” thus may be equivalent to the declaration “you are righteous.” The affirmation that someone is pure may imply a circumstance in which a declaration is made: “He is pure.”

In a similar fashion, the phrase “He believed God” may depict a situation in which Abraham “declared his ‘Amen’” to the promise of God. As a consequence, Genesis 15:6 would not appear as an interruption in the midst of a straightforward historical narrative which represented the theological analysis belonging to a later age. Under this construction of the passage, the narrative proceeds in a rather straightforward manner: God promises, Abraham declares his “Amen,” and the Lord pronounces him righteous.

This analysis of the form of Genesis 15:6 has much to commend it. The text is thus maintained in its integrity. The

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resulting understanding of the passage conforms to the total biblical picture, including subsequent New Testament analyses.

Although absolute certainty cannot be suggested with reference to this analysis, it certainly captures the flavor of the affirmation of Genesis 15:6. Whether verbally or otherwise, Abraham declared his “Amen” to the promise of God, and God reckoned his faith in the stead of righteousness.

## **B. Exegetical Concerns**

### **1. The force of the phrase “believed in Yahveh”**

Discussion of some significance has surrounded the analysis of this particular phrase. The root meaning of the verb conveys the idea of “making firm” or “establishing” something. As is often the case, the verb here occurs with the preposition “in” (ב), indicating the person in whom someone locates his steadfastness.

In this context, the phrase means essentially that Abraham “made himself steadfast or secure in Yahveh.” Not only the

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phrase itself, but the context reinforces this idea. The patriarch had every reason to despair with respect to the production of the seed which God had promised him. His wife had been childless over a period of many years, and apparently already was beyond the age of bearing children.

As over against relying on anything he could produce in himself, Abraham cast his total reliance on Yahveh’s promise to him. His trust in God to act on his behalf is set over against finding his confidence in deeds that he himself might perform.

## 2. The significance of the phrase “he reckoned it to him for righteousness”

As Genesis 15:6 records the first occurrence in scripture of the word “believed,” so it also records the first occurrence of the term “reckoned” (רָשָׁן). Yet the construction of the phrase and the subsequent usage of the term within the Pentateuch justifies a rather specific understanding in the sense of “account to him a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him.” The phraseology may not in itself exclude absolutely the possibility that the faith of Abraham was considered as his righteousness. But the context strongly pushes in another direction. The whole point is that Abraham trusts God rather than himself for his blessedness. His hope centers totally on God and his word for life.

Other scriptures in the Pentateuch employ the term רָשָׁן to indicate that a person may be “reckoned” or “regarded” as something that he himself is not. Leah and Rachel affirm that their father “reckons” or “regards” them as *strangers*, although they are his own daughters (Gen 31:15). The tithe of the Levite is “reckoned” or “regarded” as the corn of the threshing-floor and as the fulness of the winepress, although it obviously is not these things (Num 18:27, 30). Their tithe-offering functions in a substitutionary capacity.

Even closer to the “reckoning for righteousness” described

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in Genesis 15:6 is the declaration concerning certain sacrifices as described in Leviticus 7:18. If a particular sacrifice is not eaten by the third day, its value shall be lost, and it shall not be “reckoned” to the benefit of the sinner. The verse envisions a situation in which righteousness could be “reckoned” to a person, even though the individual concerned admittedly is a sinner.

In this setting, it is quite appropriate to understand Genesis 15:6 in terms of God’s accounting as righteous the person of the patriarch although he himself is unrighteous. Obviously caution must be exercised so that Genesis does not sound precisely like Romans. Yet it should be remembered that already it had been declared that “every imagination of the thoughts of man’s heart” was only evil all the day (Gen 6:5). It may be that the grace of God had delivered the chosen patriarch from something of this utterness of depravity. But it also must be remembered that already the scriptures in their impartiality had depicted the “father of the faithful” as having received a sharp rebuke from a heathen pharaoh as well as a stamp of *persona non grata* because of Abraham’s devious ways with his beautiful wife (Gen 12:17–20). Yet as a consequence of faith, God reckons him as righteous.

## C. Theological Dimensions

In addition to the basic exegetical concerns of this passage, probings into broader theological dimensions lead to a fuller appreciation of the significance of the text. Notice in particular:

### 1. The time of Abraham’s “justification”

This particular question has played a significant role in the history of the exegesis of Genesis 15:6. The time of Abraham's "justification" was a matter of first importance to the Apostle Paul. This question also occupied John Calvin at the time of the Reformation in his explanation of the relative roles of faith and works in justification.

The selection of this particular time as the juncture at which Abraham was declared righteous indicates that a life of obedience never functions as the way to right-standing with God. The life of the patriarch had been "spiritual and almost angelic." He

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had achieved essentially all that could be expected of the pious in this life. Yet after so much in terms of commendable actions, it is his faith that is accounted to him for righteousness.

The fact that this declaration concerning the faith and resulting righteousness of Abraham comes at this particular juncture does not imply that now for the first time he believes and his faith is reckoned to him for righteousness. To the contrary, he continues in a state of faith and its resulting righteousness. But the placing of this declaration of righteousness at this juncture of the patriarch's life underscores the fact that nothing has been added to faith as the way to righteousness. If this announcement had been placed at the beginning of the account of his life, it could have been proposed that the accounting of faith as righteousness related only to the patriarch's initial experience of the divine declaration of justification. In this case, it might be supposed that subsequently the decision to justify might come as a consequence of obedience. It then might have been argued that the righteousness of faith in contrast with a righteousness by the way of obedience was only initial and not perpetual. As John Calvin summarizes his argument:

But now, since after such great progress, he is still said to be justified by faith, it thence easily appears that the saints are justified freely even unto death.

While the reformer's remarks are set in an intensely polemical circumstance, they nonetheless are exegetically accurate. God reckons faith to serve in the stead of righteous deeds as the way to justification long after the patriarch's exemplary life had begun. Only faith, and not also righteous deeds, was reckoned to him for righteousness.

## **2. The reason for Abraham's "justification"**

From the foregoing discussion, it may appear obvious why Abraham was declared righteous. Because he believed God, he was regarded as righteous.

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But the further question must be posed: *why* should faith be reckoned for righteousness? What is it in the faith of Abraham that should bring forth the decision that he is regarded by God as just?

It may be suggested that asking such a question presses the text beyond its proper limits, and has the effect of flattening the entire history of redemptive revelation so that Paul in the end actually has little to add to the patriarchal narrative.

This type of objection must not be treated lightly. Always it must be remembered that in the exegetical process it is quite easy to pose more questions than a given text may be ready to answer. If answers are wrung out of texts that actually are not present in the text itself, the exegete is the loser. He is the one who sacrifices the beauty of the text in the integrity of its original setting.

Yet with all these precautions in view, the context of Genesis 15:6 does seem to offer something in response to the question, "Why is it that God should reckon this faith of the patriarch for righteousness?"

The question is indeed a profound one. What exactly is it in simple trust in God that calls forth the

justification of the sinner?

The context of Genesis 15:6 requires consideration of the particular “faith” that is reckoned for righteousness. Abraham believes God that a “seed” shall be provided from his own loins. He trusts God specifically to intervene in fulfillment of the promise concerning the seed for which he longs so desperately. The plea for reassurance on the part of the patriarch hearkens back to the original promise given to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3).

It may not be supposed that Abraham fully grasped all the details of the promise concerning the seed as it unfolded through the subsequent generations. But he certainly had knowledge of the alienation of all nations from their Creator, and was filled with the same longing for removal of the curse that had been expressed by the father of Noah at the birth of his son: “This one shall give us rest from our work and from the toil of our hands arising from the ground which the Lord has cursed” (Gen 5:29). Because of trust specifically in the coming seed that would deliver men from the curse and would introduce

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them into the blessedness of God, Abraham was regarded as righteous.

## **II. The “Fulfillment” of Genesis 15:6 in the Light of New Covenant Realities**

Genesis 15:6 does not come in the form of a prophecy. Yet it is appropriate to speak of new covenant “fulfillment” of this crucial text. For in the context of the new covenant, the realities enunciated in Genesis 15:6 find their consummate exposition and realization. Three times, by two different New Testament authors, Genesis 15:6 is quoted. Paul cites this key verse both in his letter to the Romans and in his letter to the Galatians. James also quotes Genesis 15:6.

Using this type criterion for determining the shape of the “bible” that functioned authoritatively in New Testament times could have the effect of creating a canon within the canon. Such results are not desirable. Yet it nonetheless is significant to note those passages from the Old Testament on which the writers of the New Testament scriptures heavily depend. Genesis 15:6 certainly is one of those texts.

Studying these passages brings out the diversity within the unity of the employment of the Old Testament by New Testament authors. Only as both these aspects are kept in perspective will the full impact of God’s word to his church be felt.

### **A. Romans 4:3,9,22**

This first instance of a New Testament quotation of Genesis 15:6 may serve to illustrate several aspects of the way in which the New Testament makes use of an Old Testament text. At least four characteristics of New Testament methodology may be noted.

First of all, note the interweaving of quotation-portions throughout the chapter. Not only in verses three, nine and twenty-two, but also in verses five, ten and twenty-three selected portions of Genesis 15:6 are quoted:

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Romans 4:3—(full quotation of the verse, including introductory formula)

Romans 4:5—”his faith is reckoned for righteousness”

Romans 4:9—”faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness” (including introductory formula)

Romans 4:10—”it was reckoned”

Romans 4:22—”it was reckoned to him for righteousness” (introductory formula apparently included)

Romans 4:23—”it was reckoned to him” (introductory formula apparently included)

Of course some debate could be held over the question of what precisely constitutes a quotation. No doubt this matter was of some concern as the various printed editions of the Greek New Testament were prepared. Conclusions in this area generally are represented by the device of placing in bold type the material that is regarded as quoted. Let a reminder suffice at this point. Differences in type-setting have nothing to do with the form of the original manuscripts of the New Testament. Almost certainly many quotations and allusions to the Old Testament are not currently highlighted by the type-setting of any of the various editions of the New Testament.

This method of interweaving quotation-materials is quite characteristic of the various New Testament authors, and is a subject deserving significant attention. The prince of this process of course is the writer to the Hebrews, who has proven himself quite capable of working over a space of several chapters with as many as three texts at once. But other New Testament authors make significant usage of this methodology.

A second methodological feature to note is the usage of “catchwords” throughout a section in which the argument is being built on an Old Testament text. In Romans 4, the “catchwords” are “it is reckoned” (λογίζομαι) and the “faith” word-grouping, including “he believed,” “the one who believes,” “faith,” and “those who believe” (ἐπίστευσεν, πιστεύοντι, πίστις, τῶν πιστευόντων). These key words, taken directly from Genesis 15:6, are sprinkled liberally throughout the chapter, and indicate the intensity of concentration on the text at hand.

Thirdly, the catena or chain-of-quotation methodology is employed by Paul in this chapter. Genesis 15:6 is joined by Psalm 32:1, 2 in supporting Paul’s thesis that removal of guiltiness

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comes only as a blessedness of God’s grace, and not by the way of works.

Fourthly, Paul employs the method of “running exegesis” of the Old Testament text. Actually, the entirety of Romans 4 may be regarded as a “running exegesis” of Genesis 15:6. As the argument of the chapter progresses, the various portions of the quotation are broken down and their implications for the discussion at hand are brought out. All of this is accomplished without the aid of formal outline or italicized sub-heads. When the Apostle has completed his discussion, hardly an aspect of the text remains that has not been scrutinized with the greatest care.

Looking more specifically at the substance of Paul’s exposition of Genesis 15:6, consider first the elaboration of the original phrase “it was reckoned to him for righteousness” as it is found in Romans 4:5. The original “he believed” is replaced by the noun clause “his faith.” The aorist passive “it was reckoned” is replaced by the present passive “it is reckoned.” This latter substitution has the effect of contemporizing the principle at work in Abraham’s justification.

Most significant, however, is one portion of Genesis 15:6 which receives a pointed exposition in Romans 4:5 by a specific development of the quoted text. The person of Abraham is represented in Romans 4:5 by a most striking equivalent. If “God” is the one who justifies, it is “the ungodly” that is the subject of his justification. Faith is reckoned for righteousness by God who justifies “the ungodly.”

How could the Apostle have underscored his major point more forcefully? By the skillful use of a “running exegesis,” the place originally occupied by Abraham in Genesis 15:6 now is filled by the term “ungodly.” The beloved and idolized patriarch is the ungodly. The pious one *par excellence* is the rebellious one. Even after all his years of possessing the covenant promises, he still remains an ungodly person insofar as his own personal righteousness before God is concerned. Yet God the justifier does not flinch from declaring him righteous by faith.

To undergird this point, Paul introduces a second quotation taken from the life of David (Rom 4:6–8). This citation functions subserviently to the original quotation from Genesis 15:6. This subservient

by the reappearance of the catchword “it is reckoned.” The term originates in the Genesis 15:6 quote and recurs both in Paul’s introductory comment concerning the Davidic parallel (Rom 4:6) and again in the last phrase of the quote from Psalm 32 itself (Rom 4:8). Even further, Paul expounds the “blessedness” of Psalm 32 in terms of the “reckoning” of righteousness to Abraham (Rom 4:9).

In its role as “expositor” of Genesis 15:6, Psalm 32 underlines the “negative side” of justification, concentrating on the forgiveness of sins. Romans 4:9 quotes portions both from Psalm 32 and Genesis 15:6 to show that the imputation of righteousness to Abraham included the “blessedness” of David, involving the forgiveness of sins.

Someone might have contested the description of the Abraham of Genesis 15:6 as “ungodly.” But the attachment of this verse to Psalm 32 concludes the matter, for there can be no question about the standing of David before God’s judgment-seat, so far as his own personal performance is concerned. Although chosen as a “man after God’s own heart,” he counts as his chief blessedness the non-imputation of his own sin to himself. Although unquestionably guilty as murderer and adulterer, God does not “reckon” these sins to him. It is this “blessedness” that also belonged to Abraham by God’s reckoning to him a righteousness that was not inherently his (Rom 4:9). A foreign righteousness was regarded as his by faith precisely because he had no righteousness of his own.

Interestingly, the quotation from Genesis 15:6 in Romans 4:9 varies from the form of the quotation in Romans 4:3. Paul abbreviates the quotation with the result that “it was imputed” appears first in word-order. He also substitutes “reckoned to *Abraham*” for “reckoned to him,” making it plain that he speaks about the patriarch rather than about David in his reference to the “blessedness” of the forgiveness of sins.

The time of Abraham’s justification becomes significant as Paul discusses its relation to his circumcision (Rom 4:10–12). Obedience to the commands of God is not the way to justification for this man. Even the observance of rituals prescribed by God’s law are not necessary for the forgiveness of his sins. Circumcision functions instead as a sign and seal of that which already is a reality.

In his first principal citation of Genesis 15:6 in this chapter, Paul stressed that it was by faith that a man was to be regarded as righteous (Rom 4:1–5). In his second principal citation, Paul concentrated on the imputed character of the righteousness. It is a righteousness that is reckoned to the man who is cleared a sinner (Rom 4:6–12).

In the third principal quotation from Genesis 15:6 in this chapter, Paul emphasizes the object of the faith that justifies (Rom 4:13–25). The object of the faith that justifies is defined in these verses as “the promise” (Rom 4:13, 14, 16, 20, 21), or even more pointedly as God, the author of the promise (Rom 4:17).

Abraham was fully persuaded that what God had promised, he was able also to perform (Rom 4:21). For that reason (*διὸ*) it was reckoned to him for righteousness (Rom 4:22).

Paul develops rather extensively the idea that Abraham’s belief in the God who makes alive the dead (Rom 4:17) essentially is equivalent to a belief in the God who raised Jesus the Lord from the dead (Rom 4:24). Essentially he is expounding the middle phrase of Genesis 15:6: “he believed *in the Lord*.”

Abraham’s faith in the God who could cause the dead womb to bring forth a son has as its object the same God who raised up his son Jesus from the dead. Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham steadied himself in God, believing that he could fulfil his promise to bless despite the circumstance of human impossibility. Only a faith that has this God and this promise as its object serves as the way to justify the ungodly.



## B. Galatians 3:6

From a positive perspective, this quotation of Genesis 15:6 emphasizes the *status* of all those who have been justified. By the sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the one who believes is marked indelibly as a son and citizen in the kingdom of God.

Paul appeals to the Galatians that they should remember the circumstances of their reception of the Holy Spirit:

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith? (Gal 3:2).

The allusion to the reception of the Spirit almost certainly

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refers to an objective occurrence in Galatia similar to the external manifestations of the Spirit's descent on the Gentiles in Cornelius' household (Acts 10:44–48)." On that occasion, the fact was indisputable. If the Spirit had come manifestly on Gentiles still outside the pale of Jewish law-requirements, they must by faith alone be regarded as sons of the kingdom, and subjects worthy of baptism into full membership in the church of Christ.

From a biblical-theological perspective, the sign of the baptism of the Spirit symbolizes the status of sonship and membership in the kingdom of God. When the promise was given that a Spirit-anointed descendent of David always would reign on Israel's throne, it was indicated that this individual would possess the status of "son" (2 Sam 7:14). At the Spirit-baptism of Jesus, he received the heavenly designation of "son" (Matt 3:17). Believers have received "the Spirit of adoption as sons" by which they cry, "Abba! Father!" (Rom 8:15).

The sign of the enthronement of the Spirit-anointed King of Israel was his outpouring of the same Spirit on all flesh (Acts 2:17). Having received the Spirit without measure himself, he was equipped to dispense his Spirit to all his subjects. Amazing though it may appear, even the lowliest of the citizens of Messiah's kingdom all are sons of the King, fellow-heirs of the riches of the kingdom, possessors of the personal status belonging to David himself, kingly in their own right, anointed eternally to this exalted status.

But what does the imputing of righteousness by faith alone as described in Genesis 15:6 say to this complex of ideas? Why should Paul relate the sign of the possession of the Holy Spirit to the doctrine of justification, as he does in Galatians 3:1–9? Paul makes this vital connection because righteousness, faith and the grace of imputation lie at the very heart of the kingdom of the Messiah. The Israelite naturally associated the law of Sinai with the kingdom of God as a consequence of God's declaring the nation to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" at the time of the giving of the law (Exod 19:6).

Was the way to citizenship in this kingdom therefore to be

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found in the way of personal law-keeping? Should the status of sonship to the holy God be sought by doing the law's requirements? The fact that the sign of the Spirit's baptism came by believing rather than by doing says "No!" While still guilty for not conforming to God's holy law, the Galatians received the baptism of the Holy Spirit, thus sealing their status as sons.

The experience of the Galatian believers is reinforced by the declaration of Genesis 15:6. Abraham, acknowledged father of all Israel, came to a position of right-standing with God in the same way as did the Galatians. He believed. He believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. This declaration summarizes the heart of the Christian gospel. The blessing of all nations hinges on this truth. Not by

observing the law, but by faith alone, all nations will be blessed in Abraham (Gal 3:8). By faith they shall enter the status of citizens of the kingdom, sons of Abraham, sons of God, and heirs to all the promises.

The positive side of justification certainly is present in Paul's quotation from Genesis 15:6 as found in Galatians 3:6. But in the fuller context of Galatians 2:15–3:29, this quotation from Genesis 15:6 stresses the "negative side" of justification. In order for God to justify men, sin must be removed.

Notice the following points which emphasize this aspect of God's justification of sinners:

(1) Although not sinners like the Gentiles, even Jews had to admit that no man could be righteous before God by the keeping of the law (Gal 2:15, 16). To look to another for righteousness implicitly involves acknowledging inadequate righteousness in oneself.

(2) The Old Testament scriptures underscore the fact that no flesh living can be justified by doing the law (Gal 2:16c). The Apostle alludes to Psalm 143:2, which declares that even God's servant cannot stand the scrutiny of divine judgment:

Do not enter into judgment with Thy servant,  
For in Thy sight no man living is righteous.

(3) The sacrifice of Christ establishes the absolute necessity of guilt-removal (Gal 2:20, 21). Christ surrendered himself as a sacrifice so that men might be justified. But what would be the point of such sacrifice if it were not necessary for

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guilt to be removed? If it were possible for righteousness to come by the keeping of the law, which would imply the absence of condemning guilt, then Christ died needlessly.

Paul stresses this aspect of his argument by the impassioned confrontation which begins chapter three. The foolish Galatians are bewitched! Cannot they see vividly portrayed before them Christ crucified? Here is the focal point of the Christian proclamation. But if that awesome death were not necessary for the removal of guilt, what would be the point? If men were not already guilty as law-breakers, the option of keeping the law as a way of right-standing with God would be open. The image of Christ crucified should dispel any such misapprehension. His death publically displays the need for the removal of guiltiness.

(4) God justifies even the Gentiles (Gal 3:8). Already it had been agreed that in a distinctive way Gentiles were to be regarded as "sinners" (Gal 2:15). Yet they are to be blessed in Abraham. Since they cannot be related to the patriarch ethnically, it is by faith that they are blessed with the faithful patriarch (Gal 3:9). In their case as well as in Abraham's, merit-of-birth is not the way to right-standing with God.

(5) A curse rests on everyone who does not keep all the requirements of the law (Gal 3:10–12). Historically, numerous efforts have been made to limit the works that are excluded from the way to justification by the phrase "the works of the law." In one way or another the effort is made to introduce some form of works done by the person being justified as contributing to the way of right-standing with God. In some cases, the exclusion of "works of the law" from justification has been interpreted to apply only to ceremonial law-works. At other times the phrase has been understood to exclude only works done before regeneration and thus without faith. Still others have seen the phrase as excluding everything done by man with the exception of the "work" of faith.

However, the exposition of the phrase "works of the law" by two separate Old Testament passages as quoted by Paul in

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these verses concludes the question rather definitely. As many as seek right-standing with God by the "works of the law" are under a curse, *for it is written*, Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all the things

written *in the book of the law to do them* (Gal 3:10). According to the construction of this verse, the “works of the law” are those things which the law requires that a person do. ἐξ ἔργων νόμου essentially is explicated by the equivalent phrase πᾶσιν τοῖς γεγραμμένοις ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τοῦ νόμου τοῦ ποιῆσαι αὐτά. The “works” of the law and the “doing” of the law essentially are identical.

It must not be supposed that the law requires only an external, formalized observance, so that the exclusion of works thus defined still would allow for the possibility that truly good works done from a renewed heart could be regarded as playing a role in the way to the justification of the sinner. As Charles Hodge says, “There can therefore be no form or kind of righteousness, whether natural or gracious, higher than that which the law demands, and which is comprehended in the works of the law.”

Georg Bertram indicates essentially the same conclusion with respect to the Jewish concept of the “works of the law” referred to by Paul. He says: “The works of the commandments, (מעשי מצות), often simply called מעשים by the Rabbis, correspond to what Paul calls the ἔργα νόμου.... In Judaism the works of the Law are the works required by God.”

It cannot be argued effectively that the “works of the law” in Paul refer only to the cultic ceremonies of Israel. It was this type of limitation with which John Calvin dealt in his *Institutes*. Calvin notes that since in these verses it is stated that the one who does the “works of the law” shall *live* in them, these works must be moral rather than simply ceremonial.

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Given the fallen condition of man, any works claimed as a part of the way to right-standing with God inevitably must fall into the category of boastful, self-congratulatory works. The “works of the law” in Paul includes not only that which the law requires, but also that which the law produces in a sinful humanity. This fact, however, does not detract from the principle enunciated in these verses that “the one who does” works in accord with God’s law “shall live in them” (Gal 3:12).

Because no one does the works of the law perfectly, all men stand under the curse of the law. This position of living under a curse because of law-breaking stresses the “negative side” of justification. The guilt of man must be removed if he is to live before God.

(6) The curse that has fallen on Christ also emphasizes the “negative side” of justification (Gal 3:13). He has been hanged on a tree, a fate specifically declared as cursed under the law.

This permeating emphasis on the “negative side” of justification which surrounds the quote from Genesis 15:6 in Galatians 3:6 indicates the major thrust of this particular quote in context. Jews are joined with sinful Gentiles; God’s own Old Testament servant decries his guilt before the judgment-seat; God’s beloved son hangs crucified, cursed on a tree. It is in this context that the reference to Abraham’s believing God is to be understood. His faith is reckoned to him in the stead of a righteousness of his own because he is a guilty sinner, along with all other Jews and Gentiles.

Paul’s emphasis on guilt-removal in justification is perhaps the most effective polemic against any suggestion that works done by the person seeking to be justified may serve in any way as the “ground of,” the “instrument for” or the “way to” right-standing with God. Neither the life-transforming experience of regeneration nor the ever-increasing piety associated with sanctification can prove effective in the removal of guilt. Even if a person should be perfected instantly at the point of his conversion, the good works which would follow could not be effective in blotting out guiltiness. But faith in God’s promise to provide a saving seed results in justification. All who believe are sons of Abraham. The same righteousness reckoned to him is reckoned to them.

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## C. James 2:21-23

James also quotes Genesis 15:6. He thus represents the second New Testament author that has cited this same passage from the Old Testament scriptures.

### 1. Considerations affecting the interpretation of texts quoted twice in the New Testament

Because of this particular situation, some significant aspects of the New Testament usage of the Old Testament must be kept in mind. A comparison of the various cases in which two New Testament authors appeal to the same Old Testament text manifests certain principles. Without an adequate grasp of these principles, faulty exegesis inevitably will result. Note the following:

First of all, the interpretation of an Old Testament text provided by a single New Testament passage should not be regarded as *the* interpretation of that Old Testament passage which thereby settles all questions of exegesis. The New Testament passage is inspired of God. It is infallible and inerrant in all that it teaches. It is absolutely correct in its interpretation of an Old Testament text. But a particular New Testament interpretation cannot be regarded as the only way in which an Old Testament text is to be read.

This principle may be illustrated by the more fundamental question of the significance of a New Testament quotation in determining the precise form of the original *text* of the Old Testament. The extant Hebrew text of Psalm 40:6(7) reads "My ears you have digged." The New Testament quotation of this phrase reads "A body you have prepared for me," following the text of the primary witnesses of the Septuagint. Does this New Testament quote settle the question concerning the original text of Psalm 40:6(7)? Does the shape of the New Testament quote prove that the Septuagint in this case actually represents the original text?

If it is to be assumed that a New Testament quotation may bear witness only to the original text of the Old Testament, then it must be concluded that in this case no existing text or version of the Old Testament represents the original text. For in the next verse of Hebrews, the New Testament text quotes

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the Old Testament as reading a plural form: "whole burnt offerings" (Heb 10:6; *cf.* the further pluralization in Heb 10:8). Neither the Hebrew nor the Greek text of Psalm 40 supports such a plural reading.

Because the New Testament is not written as a "handbook for textual criticism," its treatment of various Old Testament passages cannot be appealed to as settling questions of a text-critical nature. The primary concern of the New Testament when quoting the Old Testament is the application of an Old Testament text to a particular New Testament circumstance. Rather broad liberty is used in the selection and modification of the various Old Testament texts, so that the passage cited serves to its fullest potential the immediate purpose at hand.

If a New Testament writer may exercise significant liberty in his representation of the text of the Old Testament, it should not be surprising that he may choose to emphasize one particular aspect of the meaning of an Old Testament text, either in its theological significance or in its application to a New Testament circumstance. It is for this reason that one quotation of an Old Testament text cannot settle all questions related to the exegesis of that particular text.

A further illustration may be noted in the case of the New Testament's usage of Psalm 2:7. This reference to the Messiah says, "You are my son; today I have given birth to you." By appeal to the quotation in Acts 13:33, it would appear quite evident that the "Today" of the psalmist refers to the day of Christ's resurrection. The resurrection is treated figuratively as the "day" of Christ's "birth" into the lordship of his kingdom. But a careful study of the quotation in Matthew 3:17 points in an alternative direction. The heavenly voice at Jesus' baptism cites Psalm 2:7 in announcing him to be God's son. Now the effusion of the Spirit on the beloved Son appears as a figurative "birth" in fulfillment of Psalm 2:7.

This illustration serves simply to show that one quotation of an Old Testament text by the New Testament does not function in a way that exhausts the entire meaning of the original text. It also issues a caution against the practice of employing one quotation of an Old Testament text in such a way that it dictates the meaning of a second quotation of the same Old Testament passage by another New Testament author.

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A second but closely related point must be made. The usage in one New Testament passage of an Old Testament text does not control absolutely the way in which another New Testament passage may apply the same Old Testament text. Because of the richness associated with the word of God, its relevance cannot be contained narrowly. The significances of any particular text of the Old Testament may have varied applications, all of which may be valid in the framework of the total Old Testament context.

This point may be illustrated by reference to the New Testament treatment of the identity of the servant of the Lord as he is presented in Isaiah 49:6. According to this text, the “servant of the Lord” (*ebed Yahveh*) functions as a “light to the gentiles.”

Questions related to the identification of the “servant” of Isaiah are quite large. In some passages, the “servant” may be identified rather specifically with the nation of Israel (Isa 42:18, 19; 43:10; 44:1, 2, 21, 22). At other points, the servant seems clearly to be an individual separated from the corporate community of the nation (Isa. 49:5, 6; 53:5, 6). But who specifically is the servant of Isaiah 49:6, described as a “light to the gentiles”? What does the New Testament say on this more specific question?

According to the testimony of the aged Simeon, the “servant” of Isaiah 49:6 can be none other than the infant Jesus. He is ready to depart in peace, because his eyes at last have seen the savior of Israel, who is “a light of revelation to the gentiles” (Luke 2:32).

But the question of the identity of the “servant of the Lord” in Isaiah 49:6 cannot be resolved so simply. For when Paul experiences stubborn resistance to his ministry among the Jews during his first missionary journey, he bases his action of turning to the gentiles solidly on the scriptures, applying explicitly Isaiah 49:6 to his own ministry:

For thus the light for the Gentiles, that you should bring salvation to the end of the earth” (Acts 13:47)

It could be maintained that the primary application of the light-imagery even in this passage belongs to Christ. But it

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seems rather certain that Paul’s reference to the command Lord to “us” intends to treat his apostolic ministry to the gentiles also as a fulfillment of the servant’s role as described in Isaiah 49:6.

A similar case which relates even more closely to the citation of Genesis 15:6 by James and Paul is the usage of Habakkuk 2:4 by Paul and the writer to the Hebrews. Both these New Testament authors quote the same Old Testament passage. Yet each is making his own distinctive application of the truth found in the Habakkuk prophecy. Interestingly, even the form of the quotation differs in the two passages citing Habakkuk 2:4.

In Romans 1:16 and Galatians 3:11, Paul quotes Habakkuk 2:4 essentially in the form in which the words are found in the Septuagint, except for the omission of the pronominal “faith *of me*” which in the Septuagint substitutes for the Hebrew “his faith.” Paul’s point in these passages is that faith in a righteousness outside the person being justified is the only way to rightstanding for the guilty sinner. In both cases, he cites this verse in a context which establishes the sinfulness and resulting condemnation of all men.

But the writer to the Hebrews approaches the text of Habakkuk from an entirely different perspective. He

is not concerned in context to explain how the guilty sinner may be declared righteous by an all-holy God. He is discussing instead the necessity for perseverance in one's profession of belief among the community. His readers have need of patience, that they ultimately may receive the promised inheritance (Heb 10:36). The "coming one" shall arrive soon (Heb 10:37). But God will have no pleasure in the one who shrinks back (Heb 10:39). Instead of shrinking back, his righteous one shall (continue to) live by faith.

The author of Hebrews alters the word-order of his quote from the Septuagint, emphasizing that "my righteous one" shall *live* by faith (Heb 10:38). He stresses the life that ensues from faith, as the entire following chapter indicates. His primary concern is not the righteousness imputed to the guilty sinner and received by faith alone, as is the case with Paul.

An awareness of this possibility of distinctiveness in approach to the identical words of an Old Testament text is essential for a proper appreciation of the particular emphasis associated with

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each different Old Testament quotation as it occurs in the New Testament. This need for appreciating distinctiveness is particularly true with reference to the usage of Genesis 15:6 in the contexts of the Romans 4/Galatians 3 complex and in the development found in James 2.

In summary, it must be regarded as an illegitimate exegetical procedure to allow one usage of an Old Testament passage to control absolutely the way in which a second New Testament author has applied the same Old Testament text. The various New Testament contexts must be given full freedom in their analysis of the significance of the message of a particular Old Testament text as it relates to their specific context.

## **2. Contextual Contrast in James and Paul**

The primary concentration of James is on an event in the life of Abraham which occurred a minimum of thirty years after the experience recorded in Genesis 15. He centers his attention on Abraham's offering up of Isaac as an act of obedience that "justified" him (Jas 2:21). He "was justified by works" in his offering up Isaac on the altar. In context, James is contending with those who say they have faith but have no works that would establish the validity of their faith (Jas 2:14). He asserts that such faith actually is no-faith and is useless (Jas 2:17, 20).

Obviously this context is radically different than that which is addressed by Paul in Romans and Galatians. Paul in both these contexts is posing the dilemma of how it is conceivable that one who is guilty and who continues in guilt can be declared righteous before God.

This radical difference of context provides a caution against transferring all word-values and phrase-values directly from James to Paul. In particular, it would be very difficult to maintain that James intends to say that Abraham had all the guilt of his sin removed by his act of obedience as recorded in Genesis 22. Abraham's obedient act is the "bringing to fulfillment" or fruition of the faith by which he was justified. Guiltiness can be removed from the sinner only by the "reckoning" or "imputing" of a righteousness that is not his own. This principle has the inevitable effect of excluding the deeds of the sinner from the way to right-standing with God.

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As a matter of fact, even Abraham's offering of Isaac, considered in itself, hardly could receive the verdict of "not guilty" before God. For in one way or another this act also involved defilements of sin which incurred additional guilt before God. It is simply impossible that an action having guiltiness in itself could effect the removal of all other guilt.

## **3. The example of Rahab**

The point is illustrated further by reference to the other example noted by James. Not only Abraham the honorable prince of Israel, but also Rahab the adulterous mother of Israel was “justified by works” (Jas 2:25). The interesting point to consider with respect to Rahab in this context is not only the disqualification for being regarded as sinless which her life before encounter with Israel establishes. More specifically, it is the possibility of sin associated with the very act which James declares as the means of her “justification” that deserves notice.

Admittedly, it may be possible to defend Rahab’s lie to the king of Jericho. The tendency today seems to be in the direction of not regarding her misrepresentation of the facts as sin. Yet the possibility must be granted that even in the midst of her noble action, Rahab violated the law of God concerning the bearing of false witness. How then could an action which in

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itself incurred additional guilt be the way of achieving a decision of absolute guiltlessness? How could this one action be the way for the removal of guilt for all her past life of flaunting the law of God? Yet just such a concept would be involved in too facile an interchange of the word-values and phrase-values found in James and Paul.

#### **4. The relation of the faith of Genesis 15:6 to the action of Genesis 22**

James specifically relates Abraham’s action of offering Isaac (Genesis 22) to his quotation from Genesis 15 by stating that Abraham’s faith “was perfected” or “brought to its goal” (ἐτελειώθη) by works (Jas 2:22). It is not that the faith of Genesis 15:6 has any imperfections, or that this faith essentially is interchangeable with the work of Genesis 22, or that faith and works perform essentially the same function in relation to the patriarch’s righteousness. Faith *produces* works, and works bring faith to fruition.

James also specifies that by the action of offering his son, the scripture concerning the reckoning of faith as righteousness to Abraham “was fulfilled” (ἐπληρώθη) (Jas 2:23). This particular formula for the introduction of a quotation occurs most frequently in Matthew. It does not always bear the connotation of the “fulfillment” of a predicted event. Instead, it also conveys the idea of “bringing to the point of fullest realization,” or “bringing to fruition” of a principle operative in redemptive history. When the infant Jesus returns to Palestine from Egypt after the death of Herod, Hosea’s utterance “Out of Egypt I have called my son” is “fulfilled” (Hos 11:1; *cf.* Matt 2:15). This “fulfillment” is not the coming to pass of a prediction by Hosea. For Hosea’s words do not occur in the form of a prediction concerning the future, but in the form of a recollection of the past. The “fulfillment” envisioned involves the “bringing to fruition” of a principle of redemptive history that had an earlier manifestation.

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In similar fashion, James uses the “fulfillment”-phraseology to introduce his quotation from Genesis 15:6. In the offering of Isaac, the scripture was “brought to fruition” that says, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness.” His faith inevitably had its fruition in his works.

#### **5. The meaning of “justified by works” in James**

In this full contextual framework the precise usage of the term “justified” as employed by James in comparison with Paul may be understood. The question does not hinge simply on the linguistic technicality of a distinction between a “demonstrative” and a “declarative” usage of the term “to justify.” The choice between these two alternatives is not without significance. But the larger question of the full implications contextually of the “justification” envisioned by James and by Paul must be given first consideration.

Both James and Paul may be using the term δικαίω in the sense of “to declare just” rather than “to

demonstrate oneself to be just.” But even if this were the case, the two authors would be employing this declarative function of the term with radically different connotations. In Paul the context strongly emphasizes the removal of guiltiness. The ungodly sinner, still existing in his pollution despite the new life of regeneration, is declared guiltless. But in James, the removal of guiltiness simply is not the matter under consideration. The question instead is the “justification” of a man claiming to possess faith. A person may be “justified” (declared just) if he possesses the works which “bring to fulfillment or fruition” (πληρώω) the faith which he professes. In the case of Abraham, his action in offering his son could be regarded as eliciting a “justification” which confirms the validity of God’s earlier action of reckoning his faith to him in the stead of personal righteousness.

Looking more specifically at the usage of the term δικαιοῶ in James, the weight of evidence actually favors the “demonstrative” rather than the “declarative” sense. The concern expressed is “show me” your faith (Jas 2:18). James declares plainly the effect he expected the illustration of Abraham would have on his readers: “You *see* that faith was working...” (Jas 2:22). Faith is “brought to fruition” by works

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(Jas 2:22), and by works the scripture concerning the reckoning of righteousness is “brought to its fulness” (Jas 2:23). All these factors support the idea that James intends to say that Abraham was “shown to be just” by his action.

This is the position supported vigorously by John Calvin both in his commentary on James and in his *Institutes*. He says:

That we may not then fall into that false reasoning which has deceived the Sophists, we must take notice of the twofold meaning of the word *justified*. Paul means by it the gratuitous imputation of righteousness before the tribunal of God; and James, the manifestation of righteousness by the conduct, and that before me, as we may gather from the preceding words, “Shew me thy faith,” *etc.*

Elsewhere Calvin indicates that the principal error of his opponents is their thought that James is defining the way to justification, rather than noting that James only is attempting to destroy the depraved security of those who despise good works.

The person who has true faith manifests his trust by the life he lives. He shows himself to be righteous or just in his behavior. Indeed, he does not in this life keep the law of God perfectly. But righteousness actually does reside in him, and manifests itself in his actions. James states that Abraham and Rahab were “shown to be righteous” by the life that they lived in fruition of their faith.

Paul makes precisely this same point when he affirms that the faith that justifies is a living, vital “faith that works through love” (Gal 5:6). As it has been well said: “Thus the Christian life, though it begins by a momentary act of God, is continued by a process.” In expositing the significance of Galatians 5:6 specifically for its contribution to a proper understanding of the relation of Paul’s teaching on justification by faith alone to the assertions of James, J. Gresham Machen says:

Love, in the Christian sense, is not a mere emotion, but a very practical and very comprehensive thing. It involves

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nothing less than the keeping of the whole law of God. ‘The law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’ Yet the practical results of faith do not mean that faith itself is a work. It is a significant thing that in that last ‘practical’ section of Galatians Paul does not say that faith produces the life of love; he says that the Spirit of God produces it. The Spirit, then, in that section is represented as doing exactly what in the pregnant words, ‘faith working through love,’ is attributed to faith. The apparent



contradiction simply leads to the true conception of faith. True faith does not do anything. When it is said to do something (for example, when we say that it can remove mountains), that is only by a very natural shortness of expression. Faith is the exact opposite of works; faith does not give, it receives. So when Paul says that we do something by faith, that is just another way of saying that of ourselves we do nothing; when it is said that faith works through love that means that through faith the necessary basis of all Christian work has been obtained in the removal of guilt and the birth of the new man, and that the Spirit of God has been received-the Spirit who works with and through the Christian man for holy living. The force which enters the Christian life through faith and works itself out through love is the power of the Spirit of God.

As a proper perspective on the relation of James to Paul is being achieved, the cutting edge of James' quotation from Genesis 15:6 must not be lost. A guilty criminal is not pardoned simply that he may be pardoned. He is pardoned that he may *live*. Justification releases unto *life*. The fruit of Abraham's faith clearly was seen in the magnificent event of his offering Isaac. Only the faith that produces such a life of consecration and obedience is genuine. Such acts of obedience certainly are not the way for the removal of guiltiness. But they display a person to be righteous.

### Conclusion

"First impressions" of the New Testament's interpretation of the Old Testament may suggest only problems with respect to current hermeneutical questions. But more careful study eventually may lead to a radically different conclusion.

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The scriptures reveal the very "wisdom of God" in the salvation of guilty sinners, as Genesis 15:6 displays. Could it not be that these same scriptures provide the wisdom necessary for a proper procedure in their own interpretation?

Westminster Theological Seminary<sup>1</sup>

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