

Torah Observant "SHOMER MITZVOT"

שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹת

A Series on Practical Messianic Living and Apologetics (halakhah)
By Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy

Excursus - Genesis 15: "Credited to Him as Righteousness"

(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

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***My commentary "Exegeting Galatians" was meant to serve as a companion exposition to this particular teaching. I highly recommend reading them together.*

Throughout his letters, the Apostle Paul (Rav Sha'ul) seems to take great interest in Avraham, referring to him no less than 29 times!¹ Ya'akov (James) also makes use of Father Avraham in chapter 2 and verses 21-23 of his letter, going so far as to bring the binding of Isaac into the equation for us. For Ya'akov, Avraham's faith was perfected by his corresponding actions. Germane to our study, however, is the phrase "*credited to him as righteousness*," penned by Moshe in B'reshet (Genesis) 15:6 and referenced by Sha'ul in Romans 4:3

For what does the Tanakh say? "Avraham put his trust in God, and it was credited to his account as righteousness.

Given its location within Paul's arguments, both from Romans and Galatians, it is clear that the phrase is referring to imputed righteousness, that is, positional (forensic) right standing with HaShem. For Paul, it is axiomatic that Moshe describes this quality chronologically before Avraham receives the covenant of circumcision in B'reshet chapter 17. This bespeaks of the correct order in which to appropriate the covenant responsibilities of God. On the micro, saving faith in God, symbolized by God accrediting his account as righteous (Hebrew צְדָקָה tz'dakah), precedes the patriarch's obedience to the sign of circumcision. On the macro, the covenant of Avraham precedes the covenant with Moshe.

¹ Assuming Paul wrote Hebrews, the count is as follows: Romans 4:1, 2, 3, 9, 12, 13, 16; 9:7; 11:1; 2 Corinthians 11:22; Galatians 3:6, 7, 8, 9, 14, 16, 18, 29; 4:22; Hebrews 2:16; 6:13; 7:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 9; 11:8, 17.

אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-אַבְרָם

After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram...

Likewise verse 4 confesses,

וַהֲנִי דֹבֵר יְהוָה אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר

And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying...

Verse 6 of chapter 15 reveals Avram's reaction to the Word of the LORD by stating that it was at this moment that he believed the unbelievable and it was credited to him as righteousness. Remember, up until this point, Avram had remained childless, and was beginning to suppose that maybe the heir of his household was to be the recipient of God's promise from Genesis 12:1-3.⁵ The narrative of chapter 15 trails off with statements amounting to "ADONAI said to him, "I am ADONAI,"" (verse 7)⁶ and "That day ADONAI made a covenant with Avram." (verse 18)⁷

Who or what was this mysterious "Word of the LORD" that suddenly⁸ appeared in the parenthesis of the narrative with Avram?

I will let the Chazal (the Sages of Blessed Memory) add their input to this Hebraic feature of the story:

In Scripture "the word of the Lord" commonly denotes the speech addressed to patriarch or prophet (Gen. xv. 1; Num. xii. 6, xxiii. 5; I Sam. iii. 21; Amos v. 1-8); but frequently it denotes also the creative word: "By the word of the Lord were the heavens made" (Ps. xxxiii. 6; comp. "For He spake, and it was done"; "He sendeth his word, and melteth them [the ice]"; "Fire and hail; snow, and vapors; stormy wind fulfilling his word"; Ps. xxxiii. 9, cxlvii. 18, cxlviii. 8). In this sense it is said, "For ever, O Lord, thy word is settled in heaven" (Ps. cxix. 89). "The Word," heard and announced by the prophet, often became, in the conception of the seer,

⁵ B'eresheet 15:2, 3.

⁶ וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲנִי יְהוָה

⁷ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא כָּרַת יְהוָה אֶת-אַבְרָם בְּרִית

⁸ The Hebrew word הִנֵּה "hineh" is explained by Jewish authorities as "...untranslatable. It is often rendered as 'here' or 'behold,' but this is an approximation of an expression that has no equivalent in the Indo-European languages. For this reason, it is often left untranslated. In general, it serves to intensify a statement and to provide emphasis. Here, the intensity denotes that it was a sudden or intense experience." (Navigating the Bible, online commentary to Genesis 15:4)

an efficacious power apart from God, as was the angel or messenger of God: "The Lord sent a word into Jacob, and it hath lighted upon Isra'el" (Isa. ix. 7 [A. V. 8], lv. 11); "He sent his word, and healed them" (Ps. cvii. 20); and comp. "his word runneth very swiftly" (Ps. cxlvii. 15).⁹

The Word of the LORD is in fact the LORD, ADONAI himself! This much is made clear by the objective text and the subsequent notations that we observed in Hebrew via the footnotes. But let us take it one step further to complete the mystery. In Aramaic, the sister language to Hebrew, the translation of "word" becomes מאמר mah'amar, from which we get "memra". Since the Hebrew "Word" was already identified as possessing personality, the corresponding memra likewise took on identity! Early Jewish theologians defined the Memra, or Word of God, with six different characteristics. In the first portion of his Gospel, Yochanan (John) associates each of these qualifications with their Messianic fulfillment in Yeshua. These six claims were:

1. Memra is defined as distinct, yet the same as God. This struggle as to the nature of HaShem persists to this day. Messianic Jews point to the use of the term echad as a composite unity to assist in the explanation of this issue. Yochanan in Yochanan 1:1 stated: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (Complete Jewish Bible). Yeshua Himself spoke of the fulfillment of this attribute when He stated, "I and the Father are one." Yochanan 10:30, CJB
2. The second attribute of the Memra, Word of God, was that it was the agent of creation. Yochanan states that Yeshua fulfills this in Yochanan 1:3: "All things came to be through Him and without Him nothing made had being." . Rabbi Sha'ul succinctly stated this in Colossians 1:15b-16, referring to Yeshua: "He is supreme over all creation, because in connection with Him were created all things — in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones, lordships, rulers or authorities — they have all been created through Him and for Him."
3. The third attribute stated that the Memra was the agent of salvation. This is claimed in Yochanan 1:12: "But to as many as did receive Him, to those who put their trust in His person and power, He gave the right to become children of God." Yeshua stated His role as agent of salvation several times, most forcefully in Yochanan (John) 14:6b: "I AM the Way — and the Truth and the Life; no one comes to the Father except through me."
4. The fourth Jewish attribute of the Memra was that Memra was the agent of Theophany (the visible presence of God). In Yochanan 1:14 one reads: "The Word became a human being and lived with us, and we saw His Sh'khinah, The Sh'khinah of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth." Indeed, one might consider the incarnation reality of God in Messiah Yeshua to be a prolonged Theophany. As Rabbi Sha'ul forthrightly stated

⁹ Jewish Encyclopedia, pp. 464-465.

in Colossians 1:15a concerning Yeshua: "He is the visible image of the invisible God."

5. The fifth attribute of Memra was that of being the agent of covenant signing. In Yochanan 1:17 the author writes: "For the Torah was given through Moshe, grace and truth came through Yeshua the Messiah." This was the fulfillment of the prophetic words of Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah), written in the thirty-first chapter of his self-titled book in verses 30 (31) and 32 (33): "Here, the days are coming," says Adonai, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Isra'el and with the house of Y'hudah ... For this is the covenant I will make with the house of Isra'el after those days," says Adonai: "I will put my Torah within them and write it on their heart; I will be their God, and they will be my people."
6. The final attribute of Memra was that of being the agent of revelation. Yochanan writes of this in verse 18 of the first chapter of his Gospel: "No one has ever seen God; but the only and unique Son, who is identical with God and is at the Father's side — He has made Him known." When Philip asked Yeshua to reveal the Father, Yeshua's reply was "Have I been with you so long without your knowing me, Philip? Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" Yochanan 14:9.

Indeed as scholars have summarized: "The writings of John confirm that his understanding of Memra was 100 percent Hebraic. He affirms that Yeshua fulfills all six attributes and all Jewish expectations of Memra."

Conclusions

Avram placed his trust in ADONAI. The raw data gathered from the narrative tells us that it was the Word of ADONAI who received the object of such faith. To be sure, Avram's response is unique, employing the moniker "Adonai, God,"¹⁰ instead of merely YHVH like in 14:22.¹¹ Sarna notes this shift in titles in his commentary to Genesis,

This Hebrew divine title, rarely used in the Torah, appears here for the first time. It is used in a context of complaint, prayer, and request. Here, the word for "Lord" is '*adonai*', "my Lord," not the divine name of YHVH, and its use suggests a master-servant relationship. Abram does not permit his vexation to compromise his attitude of respect and reverence before God.¹²

¹⁰ וַיֹּאמֶר אֲבְרָם אֲדֹנָי יְהוִה

¹¹ אֶל-יְהוָה אֵל עֲלִיּוֹן "…unto the LORD, the most High God."

¹² Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Commentary to Genesis* (The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 113.

However, in comparison to Sarna above, we must carefully note that the Hebrew text of ADONAI (אֲדֹנָי) itself is a peculiar rendering. How so? According to ‘The Scriptures’ translation by the Institute for Scripture Research (ISR) the original Hebrew name of YHVH has been emended by the Scribes in 134 passages!¹³ This means that in 134 places in our existing Masoretic text, the Hebrew may read ADONAI (אֲדֹנָי) but the original word was in fact YHVH יהוה! Richard Spurlock of *Bereans Online*, a well-balanced messianic web site with a nice collection of podcasts for downloading, makes a similar observation in his notes to the course ‘Messiah Unveiled’:

A most interesting feature of Genesis 15 is evident only in the Hebrew. In the English of Genesis 15:2, the two words ‘Lord God’ are used. The English translation is that the English translators have up until this point used the scribal tradition of *kere ketiv* [say/write] with regard to the Tetragrammaton [sic]. If you remember, the ancient scribes used a system of circumlocution to encourage the reader to not say the Holy Name out loud. What was written was the four letters of a *yod*, a *hay*, a *vav*, and a *hay*. Under those consonants, the scribes placed the permanent *kere ketiv* in the form of vowel points. The vowel points were for the word ‘*Adonai*’ [Lord]. Thus the reader, when they came to the Holy Name, would say, ‘*Adonai*’. The English translators took this tradition to another level. Instead of writing the four letters, they substituted ‘LORD’ in all capital letters. This informed the reader that the Hebrew behind the word was in fact the Holy Name.

When we get to Genesis 15:2, the translators have a problem—the actual word ‘*Adonai*’ is used next to the Holy Name. The problem is that if they followed their translation consistently, it would say, “Lord LORD,” which is difficult rendering. Following the scribal tradition of circumlocution (word substitution), they simply write ‘Lord GOD.’ The ‘GOD’ is in fact a substitution for the Holy Name in this case...

What is the significance of this word arrangement? This is the first time this word combination is used in Scripture. This word combination is used in other places in Scriptures, but not very often. We need to investigate to see if there is some connection between these passages, and if it is a Messianic connection.¹⁴

What are we to make of this exchange of names and how does it relate to Yeshua and the Memra? May I suggest (under the guidance of the Apostolic Scriptures) that the Memra of YHVH appeared to Avram in such a way as to

¹³ The Scriptures, *Explanatory Notes: Emendations by the Sopherim*, (Institute for Scripture Research), p. 1214.

¹⁴ Richard Spurlock, *Messiah Unveiled* (available at <http://www.bereansonline.org/default.htm>, 2005), p. 34-35.

allow Avram to address him as a servant would address his visible, flesh and blood master in face-to-face reverence and respect? Did Avram see a man? Did he see the invisible YHVH? I can't be dogmatic either way since biblical theophanies are often shrouded in mystery, but my gut feeling is that Avram saw the pre-incarnate LORD Yeshua with his natural eyes and yet called him YHVH! One thing is sure: Avram believed the unbelievable, and it was to the Word of the LORD—the Memra—that he addressed his objective faith! Surely HaShem saw into the heart of the patriarch and recognized the appropriation of the choices that lay before him. What is more, only the LORD himself can supernaturally open the eyes of a man to allow him to make a choice between choosing his Messiah or rejecting him. Avraham chose to lay hold of the Promise given in Genesis 12:1-3 by seeing at the heart of such a promise a glimpse of the Messiah who would bring it to pass! Tim Hegg provides a concluding thought to our study,

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

But would God's word—His promise of a son—be enough for Abram? After all, it had been some time (perhaps as much as 20 years by the Sages reckoning) since the initial promise had been given, and there was still no son. Sarai was still barren. In fact, God's word was enough for Abram, as the next verse (v. 6) indicates. "And he believed in the LORD." Moses has reserved this clear statement of Abram's faith for the moment when the promised son is specifically the focus of attention. Surely Abram believed from the time that God first revealed Himself to him. His actions prove his faith: he left Ur, traveled to the place that God had indicated, forsook the idolatry of his fathers, and worshipped the One true God. But Moses intends us to see that Abram's faith was cast upon God in a particular fashion—in connection with the promise of a son. And thus we have the all important verse: "And he believed in the LORD, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness."¹⁵

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¹⁵ Tim Hegg, *Parashah Twelve* (torahresource.com, 2003), p. 2.