

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

EXEGETICAL STUDY OF GENESIS 15:6

וְהָאֱמֹן, בִּיהָוָה; וַיִּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ, צִדְקָה

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Advanced Hebrew Language Tools

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Contents

Introduction	1
The Word That Is The Most	1
What Hebrew Word Does “Credited As” Represent?	1
How Did The Ancient Hebrews Use תָּשׁוּבָה?	2
How Many Different Ways Is תָּשׁוּבָה Translated In English?	3
What Is The Impact Of The Contextual Setting?	4
Classifying The Usages Of תָּשׁוּבָה Within Genesis	6
Conclusion	6
Bibliography	9

Introduction

Genesis 15:6 is a significant verse foundational to Jewish and Christian faith both today and throughout both Old and New Testament biblical history. Profoundly referenced by Paul to establish principles of Christian theology, it is one of the most quoted and studied verses of the Bible. Any student of the Bible would do well to gain insights into this pivotal verse. With such vast amounts of literature with points of view so diverse as considering Genesis 15 two fictional narratives combined to a literal historical view and many more in between there are many ways to get lost or misguided when studying this verse.¹ A proper word study in Hebrew is a sound starting point.

וַיִּהְיֶה אֱמֹן, בִּיהוָה; וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ, צְדָקָה. 6 And he believed in the LORD; and He counted it to him for righteousness.²

The Word That Is The Most

The three words in this study most important to understanding the text are “believed” “counted it” and “righteousness” and much study has been done on all three. This study focuses on “credited” as this word seems to get the least amount of attention in the ambiguity and debate amongst scholars of Old and New Testament studies.

What Hebrew Word Does “Credited ” Represent?

The word translated to English as ‘credited,’ ‘reckoned it to,’ and ‘counted it’ is, in Hebrew actually a phrase: וַיַּחְשְׁבֶהָ לוֹ, *vayiahshəḇḥa liv*,³ with the specific word being חֲשֹׁבוֹן *ḥěš-bôn*, meaning ‘reckoning,’ or ‘conclusion’ according to *Workflows Logos Bible Study Tools*

¹ Mihai Handaric. Pp. 153-154.

² *Genesis chapter 15* בְּרֵאשִׁית 15. Mamre. (n.d.). Retrieved April 26, 2022, from <https://mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0115.htm>

³ Ibid.

Software, and ‘reckoning,’ ‘account,’ ‘think,’ ‘impute,’ ‘reckon,’ and, significantly, also relates to ‘the habit of believing in’ according to *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*.⁴

How Did The Ancient Hebrews Use חֶשְׁבֹן *Hěš-bôn* ?

The Hebrew word חֶשְׁבֹן *hěš-bôn*, or *cheshbon* (khash-bone') is used in Genesis three (3) times, the first is the subject of this study, Genesis 15:6 “and he counted it to him,” second is Genesis 30:30 “...shall be counted as stolen,” and third is Genesis 31:15 “are we not counted of him stranger?.”⁵ The usage of the words evolves from Genesis using it to mean something more akin to ‘considered,’ ‘counted,’ or ‘credited’ in the context of something being assessed and critiqued. For example Geneis 15:6 could be understood as Yahweh ‘gave him credit for’ or ‘attributed’ in the sense of an inventory of his character. Again in Genesis 30:30 the connotation of taking character inventory is present in ‘shall be counted stolen.’ There is implicit numerical counting of inventory, but the manner in which being stolen is referenced connotes an inventory of character inferred upon the person in custody of the sheep in question, as well as a category for accounting purposes. Finally Genesis 31:15 is translated ‘counted to him as strangers’ and could be understood as ‘considered strangers to him’ in the sense of the inventory of a category of human relationship. Genesis usage of חֶשְׁבֹן *hěš-bôn* is intertwined with an assessment of character and referred to human relations intertwined with accounting inventory (as in business).

⁴ *Workflows*. Logos Bible Software. (2022). Retrieved April 15, 2022, from <https://www.logos.com/features/workflows> and BDB,(2008). P. 432.

⁵ Ibid. <https://app.logos.com/search?layout=one&q=counted&resources=yourBible> and “Strong’s Hebrew: 2808. חֶשְׁבֹן (Cheshbon) -- a Reckoning, Account.” Accessed November 7, 2022. <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/2808.htm>

But **הֶשֶׁבֶן** *hěš·bôn* is used another fiftythree (53) times in the Old Testament. Many of which are similar to the useage in Genesis (Job 18:3, Job 19:15, 1Ch 21:6), and others include a broader range including more literal useage as in accounting of inventory, measurements, and time to almost metaphoric (counted as sheep for the slaughter Ps 44:22). The judgement of, assessment, or inventory of character remains intact even when the useage is a literal numerical counting (‘does not he see my ways, And count all my steps?’ Job 31:4). Psalm 106:3 uses almost the exact useage “was counted unto him for righteousness Unto all generations evermore.”⁶

How Many Different Ways Is **הֶשֶׁבֶן** *Hesbron* Translated In English?

הֶשֶׁבֶן *hěš·bôn* is translates as ‘reckoned it unto him’ in the HNV (also called WEB:ME), ‘reckoned it to him’ in the ASV, ‘credited it’ in the NIV, ‘counted it’ in the ESV, and ‘credited or imputed’ in the NASB20. The word reckon is defined according to the Oxford Learner Dictionary as to think something or have an opinion about something (reckon it is safe), to be generally considered to be something (it was reckoned a success), to expect to do something (reckon to be done by ten pm), to calculate an amount, a number, etc. (he reckoned the cost before starting).⁷ The origins are Germaic and are a bases for an reasonable translation of the intention behind *hesbron* in Genesis 15:6.

“Old English (*ge*)*recenian* ‘recount, relate’, of West Germanic origin; related to Dutch *rekenen* and German *rechnen* ‘to count (up)’. Early senses included ‘give an account of items received’ and ‘mention things in order’, which gave rise to the notion of ‘calculation’ and hence of ‘being of an opinion’.”⁸

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Reckon*. reckon verb - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com. (2022).

⁸ Ibid.

Synonyms ‘credited,’ and ‘counted,’ are also similar in meaning but perhaps are missing the connotation of pondering or taking mental inventory of a situation, person or thing. The choice of ‘credit’ provides a more complex understanding of the Hebrew **הֶשְׁבֹּן** *hesbron* than ‘counted it’ as the connotation of ‘giving someone credit’ implies an inventory of deed, character, or something related to the person receiving said credit. Other synonyms that could be used for **הֶשְׁבֹּן** *hěš-bôn* could be ‘attributed it’ or ‘considered it.’ However these two English words lack the accounting of inventory or assessing of data, or mental inventory that is included in ‘reckoned.’ Unfortunately the use of the word ‘reckon’ has fallen out of favor; ‘reckon’ is now associated with a rural person perhaps chewing a stalk of hay as they speak. Even though ‘reckon’ is probably a more complete translation, it is suffering from a bad image in USA 2022. This is just another example of how language evolves and is superseded by oral usage. This is great news for the Bible expositor as it means there will always be work to do in adapting and updating to accommodate evolving languages.

What Is The Impact Of The Contextual Setting?

Literal Meaning

Mihai Handaric discusses alternative interpretations based on the “Documentary Hypothesis” which argues that Genesis 15 is the result of two sources, with scholars supporting this theory accept that verses 1-5 were written prior and 7- 21 were added at a later date.”⁹ Scholars differ on whether verse 6 was included as a summary at the end of 1-5, or added later to act as a transition between the two sections. Verse 6 is in fact pivotal to the previous five verses. As to whether verses 7-21 were added later, it is likely they were, but that does not change the meaning of verses one through six.

⁹ Mihai Handaric. Pp. 153-154.

Historical Setting

Genesis 15: 6 is set in the second millennium BC, in the land of Canaan, where the surrounding inhabitants are polytheistic but Abram (later Abraham) is having one of many conversations with Yahweh this time described as a vision or trance. Verse six transitions the narrative from Yahweh's promise to Abram of countless descendants to the Covenant Yahweh makes with Abraham, perhaps as an answer to Abram's questions. The original audience would have been ever mindful of the ANE treaty rituals and the implications of Yahweh entering into contract with Abram. E.A. Speiser "looks to oral tradition" to prove the historicity of Genesis 15:6 through comparison of "documents from Nuzi, which belong to the second millennium B.C." with the biblical text showcasing their similarities.¹⁰

Grammar

When addressing the Hebrew verbal forms used in Genesis 15:6, Rogland points out the "immense theological significance" along with the importance Paul gives to the verse, demand the recognition of "the degree to which these non imperfect renderings have influenced the exegesis of this verse in its original context."¹¹ His emphasis is on the translation of וְהָאֱמִן (believed) arguing it should be recognized as an "activity" that "occurred repeatedly" thus the verse (Gen 15:6) is not intended to be the "initiation of Abraham's faith," but rather the "summarizing evaluating" of the on-going relationship between Abram and Yahweh.¹² With this interpretation in mind, the 'accounting of' or 'inventory' nature of הֶעֱשָׂבֹן *hěš-bôn* in this context agrees. The verse is essentially assessing the ongoing faith Abram expresses in his questions and conversations with Yahweh regarding the future Yahweh has planned and promised for Abram.

¹⁰ Mihai Handaric. Pp. 153-154.

¹¹ Rogland, Pp. 239, 243

¹² Ibid.

Classifying The Usages Of **הֶשְׁבֹּן** *hěš·bôn* Within Genesis

Various points of interpretation

O. Palmer Robertson looks to the uses of **הֶשְׁבֹּן** *hěš·bôn* in other Old Testament passages to interpret a connotation that implies "... a righteousness that does not inherently belong to him."¹³ Robertson argues, "Other scriptures in the Pentateuch employ the term **חשב** to indicate that a person may be "reckoned" or "regarded" as something that he himself is not."¹⁴ Paul's New Testament Theology is in agreement with Robertson's interpretation.

What Does Paul Say And Why Does It Matter?

Mihai discusses significant factors influencing interpretations of Romans 4:1–11, "Paul emphasizes that Abraham himself received personally, from Yahweh, Gen 15:6" meaning Paul believed Abram to be the source of the Genesis 15:6 narrative if not the actual author.¹⁵ Further, "Paul asserts that Abraham was justified" or counted, or reckoned worthy "through his personal faith."¹⁶ The implications are likewise significant to how expositors interpret Genesis 15:6. Within the New Testament is a first person account of an Apostle of Christ who is a well known scholar and pharisee referencing Genesis 15:6 as historical literature.

Conclusion

Synthesis

Mihai Handaric concludes with a compelling argument, "Therefore, the correct approach concerning Gen.15: 6, is to accept the historicity of this passage ... that Paul considers it as part

¹³ Robertson, O. P. Pp. 265-266

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Mihai Handaric. "Genesis 15: 6 in the Light of Different Schools of Interpretation". Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies 2:151-169.

¹⁶ Ibid.

of an historical narrative... accepted, also, by the NT writings”¹⁷ Whether or not one believes the historicity, the only faithful to the text interpretation can be that of historical as that it what it meant to the audience who originally received them and to audiences contemporary to the New Testament writings.

Viewing the narrative as historical, הֶשְׁבֹּן *‘hěš·bôn,*’ is best translated as ‘reckoned’ with the idea of an inventory or assessment rendered to Abram that he earned on the merit of his ongoing relationship of *faith in Yahweh* according to Paul, alone. This assessment in verse six (15:6) is the precursor to the Covenant that Yahweh initiates with Abram. It is in essence the summary of how the covenant came to be. With such significant outcome to the ‘reckoning of continuously believing in Yahweh’ it is no surprise that the passage was well known and provided powerful impact to Paul’s theology laid out in Romans 4:1-11. Foundational theologically to both Judaism and Christianity, it is prudent to understand the significance of the verse, and have an aptitude to apply it appropriately.

Theological Implications, Applications

Abram’s questions to Yahweh should not be perceived as disrespectful, scrutinizing, or doubtful. Rogland concurs with, “Faith in the Lord does not mean the absence of all questions and confusion; it means accepting the Lord's word of promise and trusting in its truthfulness, even when by all appearances the reality seems otherwise.”¹⁸ Questioning is a expression of curiosity and trust. There is a level of comfort established in relationships where questions can flow freely as learning, innocent curiosity, and passion are cultivated in questions. While Abram believed Yahweh he did not understand how Yahweh could fulfill the plans he had for Abram.

¹⁷ Mihai Handaric. "Genesis 15: 6 in the Light of Different Schools of Interpretation". Journal of Humanistic and Social Studies 2:151-169.

¹⁸ Rogland. P. 234.

Abram questioned him in wonder like a child asking where the present came from and how did Santa get down the chimney? In the New Testament Jesus beckons come to him like children (Mt 18:3,Mk 10:15). Perhaps this is how believers understand how Yahweh perceived Abram's questions. One fact remains, faith is foundational to one branch of the Abrahamic religions.

The dependence on faith is especially crucial to Christianity. Jewish people have an archeological, linguistic, and genetic legacy. They are a people with or without their folklore being true. Christianity begins and ends with the belief that the Old Testament and New Testament are divinely inspired infallible if not inerrant and wholly, holy, reliable. If modern day Christians have misinterpreted Ancient Near Eastern contract law to be uniquely Judean and monotheistic in origin, what happens to their theology when more and more scientific and academic fields uncover material data adding to an ever increasing body of evidence that undermines the authenticity of the allegedly divine monotheistic origins? What happens if Jewish academicians in Juresalem no longer hold "Old Testament" literature as anything more than political propaganda? Where does the Christian faith go from there, if everything that the "faith" is built upon crumbles down? How long do intelligent human beings defer reason to uphold debunked mythology? And to what end?

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Suggested Further Readings

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