

## APOSTOLIC SCRIPTURE REFLECTION:

### for *Lekh-Lekha*

by Mark Huey    posted 31 October, 2009    www.outreachisrael.net

Acts 7:1-8

Romans 3:19-5:6

Galatians 3:15-18; 5:1-6

Colossians 2:11-15

Hebrews 7:1-19, 11:8-12

### “Faith Righteousness and Circumcision Status”

By the time many people reach *Lekh-Lekha* (Genesis 12:1-17:27), there is a natural tendency to focus on where the blessings bestowed upon those who bless Abraham, and by extension the Jewish people, affect us today. Genesis 12:1-3 are verses commonly quoted by Christians who encourage support for the Jewish people and State of Israel, and how God will show favor to those who help His chosen people:

“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed’ (Genesis 12:1-3).

Certainly, we as a Messianic ministry encourage support for the Jewish people and State of Israel, and would by no means suggest that Genesis 12:1-3 does not imply this. Yet, we should not consider Genesis 12:1-3 as *only* encouraging support of the Jewish people and standing against anti-Semitism—because these words were originally and *primarily* given to bless Abraham *himself*, and then how his descendants would bless the entire world. *Lekh-Lekha* gives us some important background information about the faith of Abraham reckoning him in a righteous, covenantal relationship with God—which is significantly appealed to in the Apostolic Scriptures. Abraham had to place his total trust in the unseen God, that His promises to make him great would come to pass:

“Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.’ And He took him outside and said, ‘Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ **Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness**” (Genesis 15:4-6).

Here, as Abraham dialogues with God about the future of his physical heirs, he is told about the multitude of descendants that would come forth from his own body. Abraham's servant Eliezer (Genesis 15:2), at that time, was positioned to be heir to his wealth—although it was going to change. In this awesome moment, after surveying the night sky and trying to count the stars as representing his future progeny, Abram believed what was communicated, and consequently his faith in the words of God to him was regarded as righteousness. Abraham's example of total trust and confidence in the Creator has been widely considered to be the model of faith that every person since should strive to follow. Only by such belief in God can our sins be forgiven, and can we be considered a part of His people.

Additionally in our Torah reading this week, the sign of circumcision is described. As the *parashah* comes to a close in Genesis 17, after the circumstances of the birth of Ishmael by the handmaiden Hagar, the renaming of Abram to Abraham, and the announcement of the birth of Isaac through the renamed Sarah are all detailed—the males in Abraham's company are circumcised:

“But God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make

him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.' When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham. **Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all *the servants* who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him. Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son. All the men of his household, who were born in the house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him"** (Genesis 17:19-27).

In the First Century C.E., the Apostle Paul makes some serious references to the life example of Abraham, detailing how he was considered righteous before God *prior to his circumcision*. Understanding the faithful trust of Abraham in God, and how he was considered righteous, is imperative for anyone who now partakes of salvation in Messiah Yeshua. In Romans 4, Paul states how the Patriarch Abraham was considered righteous while uncircumcised, and that circumcision undertaken later, simply served as a physical reminder of his covenant relationship with God. Similarly, for any of the Jewish Believers in Rome to think that circumcision status is primary to belief/faith status, perhaps looking down on their non-Jewish brothers and sisters in Messiah, would be going against ancient Biblical precedents:

"What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS' [Genesis 15:6]. Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 'BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT' [Psalm 32:1-2]. Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, 'FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS' [Genesis 15:6]. How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all" (Romans 4:1-16).

It should be forever understood that belief in God, and now in His Messiah, precedes any form of outward works. The non-Jewish Believers in the First Century were not to be reckoned "righteous" on the basis of their circumcision status—but on the basis of their faith status in the Son of God. In his previous writing to the Galatians, Paul had to remind his audience that if human agreements cannot be easily modified or changed, how then could those disturbing them change God's original promises made to Abraham? The formal giving of the Torah to Israel later on Mount Sinai was not in contradiction to the Abrahamic promise, but the God-promised inheritance to His people was incumbent upon how the Abrahamic promise has now manifested itself in the arrival of the Messiah. This was something completely unconditional:

"Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is *only* a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. Now the promises were

spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, 'And to seeds,' as *referring* to many, but *rather* to one, 'And to your seed,' that is, Messiah. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise" (Galatians 3:15-18).

In the Galatians' case, they were being improperly influenced that in order to be reckoned as members of God's covenant people they had to immediately undergo ritual proselyte circumcision, which would in turn probably lead to them relying on the Torah as a means for salvation rather than Yeshua. Faith in God and His Messiah were placed *secondary* to circumcision and being a good proselyte:

"It was for freedom that Messiah set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery. Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Messiah will be of no benefit to you. And I testify again to every man who receives circumcision, that he is under obligation to keep the whole Law. You have been severed from Messiah, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace. For we through the Spirit, by faith, are waiting for the hope of righteousness. **For in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but faith working through love**" (Galatians 5:2-6).

These are not words that are anti-Torah, but they do place the Torah as secondary to the salvation that we are to possess in the Messiah Yeshua. Faith in Yeshua manifesting itself through love is to be the motivation to obey its commandments (Matthew 5:16ff)! The Galatians, on the contrary, had been led astray so as to think that one's circumcision status was superior to faith status.

Of course, the Biblical concept of being circumcised in the flesh is to symbolically represent what the transformation of a circumcised heart entails. In his later letter to the Colossians, Paul uses circumcision to describe details of how belief in the sacrificial work of Yeshua actually brings one a circumcised heart—and nullifies the condemnation of the Torah pronounced upon sinners. In the Colossians' unique case, Yeshua's work also vindicates His total superiority over any of the angelic or cosmic powers they may have thought to entreat (cf. Colossians 2:18ff). Paul teaches,

"[I]n Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Messiah; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. **When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.** When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through Him" (Colossians 2:11-15).

While the Apostolic Scriptures tend to emphasize the necessity of faith in Yeshua before having works, only a selective reading of verses could cause one to think that Believers are not to have works! The author of Hebrews considers Abraham one of the most important examples of faith to consider, as he clearly had to believe in God to then respond in appropriate obedience to Him. Not only is Abraham lauded, but the partnership he had with his wife Sarah is also emphasized:

"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign *land*, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, *as many descendants AS THE STARS OF*

HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE [Genesis 15:5]" (Hebrews 11:8-12).

These kinds of faith lessons are critical for us to understand God's revelation to us in the Scriptures! The words of the Apostles bring clarity to our lives, as we seek to properly balance the role of faith in God, and how all things are secondary to the completed work of Yeshua at Golgotha.

I pray that our faith in the Lord may grow even greater—as we each embrace Yeshua's prophecy delivered to the Disciples gathered at the Last Supper:

"Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; otherwise believe because of the works themselves. **Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do, he will do also; and greater works than these he will do; because I go to the Father**" (John 14:10-12).

The required works that the Father asks of us can only be performed by the inauguration of the New Covenant in our lives (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 36:26-27), as the Holy Spirit writes His commandments on our hearts. But first, as has been the case since Abraham—we **must have faith!**

Until the restoration of all things...

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