

ABRAM'S AMEN

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“AND he believed (in) the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Viewing this classic theological text as thus traditionally translated, von Rad concludes that it is the statement of a “mental occurrence on the part of Abraham first and Yahweh second,”¹ a statement with almost “the quality of a general theological tenet.”² He maintains that this verse is the product of the revisionist’s reflection on old narrative materials and that he has inserted it in them as a programmatic index to their theological significance. However, a satisfying explanation does not readily suggest itself as to why such a theological observation would have been introduced at this particular point, where the context has spoken only of Abram’s plaint (15:2 f.; *cf.* verse 8), rather than in connection with some other episode where Abram’s confidence in the Lord is plainly manifested (as, for example, at Gen. 12:3 f. or 14:21–24).

This difficulty remains so long as we hold to the inner, “mental” nature of the verse 6 event. We do not avoid it even when we regard the verse not as an appended editorial opinion but as an actual moment in the particular historical episode described in Genesis 15. For while Abram would know his own psychological reaction to God’s word of promise and could have introduced an observation concerning his belief into the tradition, this seems improbable. Moreover, even Abram would not have known about an unexpressed, purely “mental” divine reckoning of righteousness to him. And to assume that such an unexpressed response of God to the faith

¹ *Genesis* (tr. by John H. Marks; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 184. Von Rad comments: “The narrator leaves the stargazing man, so to speak, and turns to the reader, to whom he communicates theological opinions of great theological compactness, without describing the actual occurrence upon which these opinions are founded, either in the case of Abraham or in the case of Yahweh” (p. 179).

² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

of Abram on this occasion was later communicated to either a traditionist or to the author of Genesis by a special revelation appears too artificial a reconstruction of the course of the inspired recording of the history.

There is reason, therefore, to take another look at Genesis 15:6, alert to the desirability of discovering some outward occurrences that will account for what is said about both Abram and Yahweh. The historiographical problem encountered in Genesis 15:6 arises, of course, whenever an act of believing is recorded, and a survey of such passages employing **האמין**, particularly when relationship to God is in view, will show that the historian had before his mind some outward faith-manifestation, which is at least implicit in his account. This external expression of belief assumes forms like the voicing of praise and trust in a hymn (Exod. 14:31; cf. 15:1 ff.), the demonstration of repentance (Jon. 3:5), or, in negative instances, the display of rebellious behavior (Num. 14:11; Deut. 1:32; 2 Kgs. 17:14; Ps. 78:22). In the case of Genesis 15:6, the indication of an outward act of faith, and thus the key to a more satisfactory exegesis of the verse, will be found, we believe, in the term **האמין** itself.

Delbert Hillers has recently drawn attention to a type of verb in biblical Hebrew that he calls "delocutive," a term previously employed in analysis of Indo-European languages. It is intended to denote the phenomenon of a spoken formula or stock phrase that has been verbalized. Hillers cites, for example, **אָרְבֵּי קָדְשׁ**, "declare righteous," comparing the judicial verdict, **אָרְבֵּי קָדְשׁ**, and **טָהַר**, "declare pure," comparing the priestly pronouncement, **טָהַר הוּא**.³

Our suggestion is that **האמין** is another of these delocutive verbs and that its delocutive origin is discernible in Genesis 15:6 (and elsewhere).⁴ This verse will then state not (explicitly) that Abram's inner attitude was one of faith but that

³ Delbert R. Hillers, "Delocutive Verbs in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 86 (1967), 320-324. Hillers' thesis offers a counter-proposal for the customary category of declarative *pi'el/hiph'il*.

⁴ The delocutive meaning coexists with other meanings of these verbs in the same conjugations. Thus, just as **טָהַר** means both "purify" and "pronounce, 'It is pure,'" so **האמין** means both "believe (in)" and "declare, 'Amen'."

Abram voiced his "Amen" (אָמֵן) in audible response to the word of God.

The fact that that statement appears in the context of a formal procedure in which such an "Amen" was a customary form of response adds plausibility to the interpretation presented here. Genesis 15 is the account of a solemn covenant ritual and an "Amen" response by the covenant vassal in such ceremonies is attested in the records of both biblical and extra-biblical covenants.⁵ Also indicative of the external-procedural rather than internal-psychological level of Genesis 15:6 is the terminology of its second clause. The verb חָשַׁב, "reckon," is employed for the rendering of decisions in cultic-judicial process (cf. Lev. 7:18; 17:4; Num. 18:27). And the substance of the divine reckoning, "righteousness," points to the judicial locution, "You are in the right."⁶ Thus, in the case of Yahweh's act, too, intimations of an outward occurrence are present in Genesis 15:6 itself.⁷

In order to place the delocutive interpretation of אָמֵן in Genesis 15:6 in a more adequate context, at least brief consideration must be given to the meaning this verbal form possesses as employed some fifty times elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁸ There have been attempts to explain the *hiph'il*

⁵ Cf. Esarhaddon's Nimrud Treaty, lines 494-512 and Deut. 27:15 ff. See my *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), p. 29. It was this covenantal Amen that first suggested to the writer the possibility of understanding אָמֵן in Genesis 15:6 as a confessional act. This interpretation was incorporated in a brief commentary on Genesis prepared for a volume not yet published. The reading of Hillers' article prompted the present expanded note, and I would express my gratitude to him, too, for his further clarification of his position in private correspondence. The preparation of the present essay, it will be observed, has survived an unnerving experience that befell its author subsequently — the noticing of J. Barr's comment: "Certainly no one is likely to believe that *he'emin* in fact developed from the practice of saying 'Amen'" (*The Semantics of Biblical Language*, London: Oxford University Press, 1961, p. 179).

⁶ See above on delocutive אָמֵן/אָמֵן.

⁷ The pronominal suffix-object of חָשַׁב is more readily accounted for if there is a particular utterance of "Amen" to serve as antecedent.

⁸ For a recent useful survey of this much discussed question see H. Wildberger, "'Glauben', Erwägungen zu אָמֵן," in *Hebräische Wortforschung* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, XVI, 372-

formation of אָמֵן as causative, but a declarative-estimative or an intransitive (or internal-transitive) function, or a blend of the last two, is usually favored. Weiser, arguing for a declarative element in the meaning of אָמֵן הַיְיָ, explains its sense thus: "Gott für אָמֵן erklären, oder umschrieben: zu Gott Amen sagen."⁹ He apparently does not intend, however, to account for אָמֵן הַיְיָ as actually a delocutive, but as simply a denominative. The main criticism that is brought against this or any form of declarative or causative interpretation by advocates of the intransitive view is that אָמֵן הַיְיָ is never followed by the direct object of the one on whom the declarative or causative action terminates (except in the Masoretic text of Judges 11:20 — or, at least, so it has been generally thought).¹⁰

Right here the delocutive view commends itself by its ability to account on the one hand for certain data that have encouraged declarative interpretations and on the other to explain the absence of the direct object. Repeated contextual association of אָמֵן הַיְיָ (as well as אָמֵן) with the covenant relationship, especially in its formal moments of confessional decision, suggests the likelihood that אָמֵן הַיְיָ refers to some sort of declarative act.¹¹ At the same time, the absence of a direct object is compatible with a delocutive אָמֵן הַיְיָ, for its only possible direct object (the Amen locution) is, so to speak, built into the verb itself, while the person to whom such an Amen is addressed would naturally be indirectly related to the verb by a preposition, which is the actual usage after אָמֵן הַיְיָ.

Our position is not, of course, that אָמֵן הַיְיָ has delocutive force every time it is employed in the Old Testament. But while recognizing that in many cases אָמֵן הַיְיָ has internal-transitive meaning, we do maintain that there are passages

386. The lively current interest in this matter is evidenced by a second article on it in this same Baumgartner *Festschrift*. See R. Smend, "Zur Geschichte von אָמֵן הַיְיָ," *ibid.*, pp. 284-290.

⁹ Article πιστεύω κτλ., *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, VI (1959), 187.

¹⁰ Cf., e. g., Wildberger, *op. cit.*, pp. 374 ff.; Barr, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

¹¹ Cf. Weiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 187 ff. In the non-religious usage too a connection is found between אָמֵן הַיְיָ and verbs of saying.

where that meaning is not applicable or where a translation of **האמין** as "to declare 'Amen'" is, to say the least, preferable, and that these instances are indicative of a delocutive derivation of **האמין**. As for the over-all development of the usage of **האמין**, it can be readily understood how, starting with the specific, concrete meaning "declare 'Amen,'" the internalized meaning of "believe" or "believe in" could arise. The same would also be so if there were cases of a declarative-estimative usage of **האמין**. The reverse would not be true in either case. Possibly, however, the diversity of the Old Testament usage of **האמין** represents a more complex development, with a confluence into one common verbal form of more than one tributary source.

Without attempting here to offer a brief for every possible instance of delocutive **האמין** (*i. e.*, of **האמין** with delocutive force), we will simply call attention to the kinds of passages where there appear to be definite advantages in the delocutive interpretation. By way of explaining the usage **האמין ב** in Genesis 15:6, consideration will be given below to Isaiah 43:9 f. and note taken of the possible delocutive use of **האמין** there. An especially interesting passage is Judges 11:20, the only one where **האמין** is followed by **אם**. This has often been regarded as an anomalous construction and the text has been emended from **וְלֹא־הֵאמִין** to **יִמָּאן**, "refused," with appeal to possible partial LXX support and to what would be a close parallel in Numbers 20:21. But it is preferable to accept the preserved text, taking **האמין** as delocutive and the **אם** not as the accusative particle but as the preposition "with." Thus, when the Israelite delegation arrived requesting passage through his land, "Sihon did not declare 'Amen' with Israel." This would then be another idiom for expressing the idea of making covenant; other expressions meaning to ratify a covenant also indicate the bilateralism by means of the preposition **אם**, or **עם**.¹²

¹² Cf., *e. g.*, Gen. 26:28; Deut. 20:12; 2 Sam. 3:12 f. Note also the expression **כָּרְתִים אֶתְּנָה** in Neh. 10:1 (Eng. 9:38). Weiser was moving in the right direction on Jdg. 11:20 with the translation: "to make an agreement with (*i. e.*, to permit)"; *op. cit.*, p. 186, note 106. But it is not clear how his general interpretation of **האמין** would warrant the particular meaning which he recognized was called for in this passage.

The seven passages where אָמֵן is employed absolutely offer some attractive possibilities of delocutive usage, particularly if it is recognized that אָמֵן as well as אָמֵן may be the locution involved.³³ Four of them describe occasions when Israel was confronted with signs or marvelous divine acts in response to which a formal attestation to their divine origin was in order (Exod. 4:31; Isa. 7:9; 28:16; Hab. 1:5). In three of them אָמֵן is closely connected with verbs of saying (Job 29:24; *cf.* verse 22; 39:24; *cf.* verse 25; Ps. 116:10). Covenant confirmation (*cf.* Gen. 15:6 and Jdg. 11:20) is perhaps the point in two passages. Thus, in Isaiah 28:16 the decision of those to whom the אָמֵן act refers is set in contrast to the making of a covenant with death (verses 15, 18). And in Job 39:24 what is said about the horse may well parallel the thought expressed concerning Leviathan in Job 40:28 (English 41:4), where God asks: "Will he make a covenant with you to take him for your servant forever?" If so, the idea in Job 39:24 f. would be that no display of military terror induces the aroused battle steed to hold back from the fray. He does not utter a yielding vassal's "Amen" at the blare of the trumpet (24b); no, when the trumpet blasts he shrills back a defiant "Aha" (25a). The contrast brought out sharply by the poetic parallelism of verses 24b and 25a comes to focus in the opposing locutions, Amen and Aha.

Another type of context where the usage of אָמֵן is easily understood if it is delocutive but which other approaches explain only awkwardly is that involving commands. Response to commands is in terms of assent and obedience, not directly in terms of trust or credence, which are appropriate rather to reports and promises. Agreeably, in the passages under discussion (see Deut. 9:23; 2 Kgs. 17:14; Pss. 106:24; 119:66) אָמֵן is actually found in series with verbs not of trust but of obedience. Moreover, the practice of accepting a charge by saying "Amen" is evidenced elsewhere.³⁴

It would appear, therefore, that a delocutive use of אָמֵן in Genesis 15:6 would not be an isolated phenomenon but part

³³ See further below.

³⁴ See the discussion of the function of the Amen formula below, noting especially 1 Kgs. 1:36.

of a fairly widely attested usage that points to a delocutive origin of the *hiph'il* of אָמֵן, from which, indeed, all the functions of this verbal form possibly evolved.

The character and orientation of Abram's "Amen" (Gen. 15:6) require further scrutiny. What is the significance of בְּיְהוָה, and to what does the "Amen" subscribe?

Elsewhere in the Old Testament אָמֵן functions as a liturgical assent after the praise and blessing of God (1 Chron. 16:36; Pss. 41:14(13); 72:19; 89:53(52); 106:48; Neh. 8:6; *cf.* 1 Cor. 14:16). It also serves as a formula of consignment under imprecatory oath, particularly in covenant-making (Num. 5:22; Deut. 27:15–26; Neh. 5:13; Jer. 11:5).¹⁵ Benaiah's "Amen" before king David was a virtual oath of allegiance, accepting the appointment of Solomon for dynastic succession (1 Kgs. 1:36). Faith-subscription to a word of prophetic promise could also be expressed by an "Amen," as may be seen in Jeremiah's mocking "Amen" to Hananiah's false prophecy of restoration (Jer. 28:6).¹⁶

Another locution to which delocutive אָמֵן can be related is אָמֵן¹⁷ "truth." Isaiah 43:9 f. documents the use of אָמֵן in legal testimony,¹⁸ and perhaps contains another instance of the delocutive use of אָמֵן. In this context Yahweh challenges the heathen to present legal testimony in support of the claims of their gods by declaring, אָמֵן, "It is true" (9). Then turning to his own people, Yahweh identifies them as "my witnesses" (10a). To this is added a statement of the purpose of their appointment, translated in standard English versions, "that you may know and believe me (אָמֵן יִנְי לִי) and understand that I am He" (10b). In the following verses Yahweh's exclusive claims to be God and Savior are proclaimed and the role of his people as witnesses to the validity of those claims is reaffirmed. The context, therefore, suggests that אָמֵן יִנְי לִי (10b) means not just to believe in the heart

¹⁵ Note again here the expression in Neh. 10:1 for "We make a firm covenant" (*cf.* footnote 12 above).

¹⁶ A New Testament example of this in sincere mode is the Apocalypse's "Amen" to the promise of Christ's coming (Rev. 1:7; 22:20).

¹⁷ A contraction for אָמֵן from אָמֵן.

¹⁸ *Cf.* also Deut. 13:15(14); 17:4; 22:20.

but to act as witnesses for Yahweh in judicial process, endorsing his own self-identification by declaring, אָמֵן, "It is true."¹⁹

Abram's confessional response denoted by אָמֵן in Genesis 15:6 was not, at least not directly, an אָמֵן of attestation to Yahweh's self-glorification but an אָמֵן of faith-subscription to God's covenant promises. In those suzerainty covenants that were ratified by the vassal's oath of allegiance, the vassal by his "Amen" placed himself under the curse-sanctions of the covenant; he conditionally cursed himself. The Genesis 15 covenant, however, was ratified by the Lord's oath-ritual (17 f.), guaranteeing the blessing-sanctions of this covenant. The "Amen" of Abram was oriented, therefore, not to the curse- but the blessing-sanctions; he blessed himself by faith.

Although Abram's response is recorded in immediate connection with the promise of an heir and innumerable descendants (5), it is possible that in this chapter, as often in Genesis and in other biblical narratives, the arrangement of the materials is not simply chronological. If so, the beginning of the covenantal transaction may actually be recorded at verse 7, which contains the Lord's words of self-identification and a historical résumé, for these were the two opening features in the literary pattern of treaties of the second millennium B. C. In that case, verses 1b-4 would probably belong to the trance experience of 12 ff. (*cf.* 1b and 12b) and verses 5 and 6 would belong to the somewhat later waking experience (*cf.* 5 with 12 and 17). Abram's faith-claim (6) would then be oriented to the broad complex of God's promises constituting the total beatitude of the kingdom inheritance (*cf.* 18 ff.).

On the delocutive understanding of אָמֵן, the following בִּיהוּה will not have the same force as when אָמֵן is translated "believed (in)." What is meant by בִּיהוּה on this approach may be seen in an Isaianic passage descriptive of the coming time when all the covenant promises have been fulfilled: "He who blesses himself in the land shall bless himself by the God of truth (אֱלֹהֵי אֱמֻנָה), and he who takes an oath

¹⁹ Note the description of Yahweh as "a true and faithful witness" (עֵד אֱמֻנָה וְאֱמֻנָה) in the people's oath of obedience before Jeremiah (Jer. 42:5) and Christ's self-identification as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness" (Rev. 3:14). Relevant in the latter connection is Jesus' familiar formula of validation for his own witness, "verily, verily" (*amēn, amēn*). See too Dan. 10:1; Prov. 14:25.

in the land shall swear by the God of truth" (Isa. 65:16, *RSV*). To make a solemn affirmation of benediction or malediction by a deity is to acknowledge that he controls one's life and destiny; it is a religious confession. In the stipulations of Yahweh's covenantal rule over Israel the insistence that they swear by his name is coupled as a virtual synonym with the primary demand that they fear and serve him (Deut. 6:13; 10:20; *cf.* Ps. 63:12(11); Isa. 48:1; Jer. 4:2; 5:7; 12:16). The Isaianic prospect is that at the consummation of God's reign, when those who have committed their futures to the god of fortune have been confounded but Yahweh's people have experienced his promised deliverance (Isa. 65:11 ff.), the Lord God will alone be acknowledged in blessings and oaths-curses. Like father Abram all God's servants will pronounce their "Amen's" in Yahweh's name (*i. e.*, בִּיהוָה).²⁰ Yahweh will be the God of the confessional "Amen" (*i. e.*, אֱלֹהֵי אָמֵן).

In summary, the meaning of וְהֵאמִין בִּיהוָה (Gen. 15:6a) is that Abram declared "Amen" in the name of Yahweh.²¹ His declaration was primarily a confession of faith in the promises of God; it was also a witness to the lordship of Yahweh, the God of the promises. Now the covenant servant who offers such a confessional witness in sincerity, not deceitfully, shall receive blessing from Yahweh, even righteousness from the God of his salvation.²² This judicial consequence comes to expression in the sequel to Abram's "Amen." For Genesis 15:6b records the Lord's verdict of justification pronounced in Abram's hearing during the course of the covenantal ceremony.²³

To read Genesis 15:6 as a general tenet distilled from the theological reflections of the prophetic period²⁴ is a misreading

²⁰ *Cf.* Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.

²¹ Perhaps he used the formula אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה, "As Yahweh lives"; *cf.*, *e. g.*, Jer. 4:2; 12:16.

²² See Ps. 24:4 f.; *cf.* Rom. 10:9 f.

²³ The reflection of Gen. 15:6 in Hab. 2:4 suggests the possibility that along with אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה the divine pronouncement to Abram added the word of reward, קִיָּה קִיָּה (cf. Ezk. 18:9), in appropriate complementation to the אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה formula possibly used by Abram (*cf.* note 14).

²⁴ See Smend, *op. cit.*, for a recent statement of this approach, which in its broader application involves the assigning of late dates to all passages where אֱלֹהֵי יְהוָה is understood in the sense of religious trust.

of a simple narrative description of an external occurrence. The ceremonial procedure described is of authentic ancient vintage and the account would not, therefore, supply cause to the documentary theorists to assign the hypothetical source containing it to a relatively late date. By the same token, with the delocutive interpretation of יְמוּנָה in Genesis 15:6 we are now in a position to trace the divine disclosure of the truth of justification by faith in a way that accords more than the previous interpretations allowed with the progressive nature of biblical revelation. We need no longer assume the anomaly of a formularized analysis of the inner spiritual-judicial workings of salvation presented at the earliest stage of that revelation. We may rather see in Genesis 15 the descriptive account of a historical episode, the theological implications of which were only later, according to the normal order of Scripture, articulated by inspired prophets and apostles.

Although New Testament quotations of Genesis 15:6, following LXX, do not reproduce the overt character of the act denoted by יְמוּנָה , it is nevertheless possible that the writers involved understood the verse as referring to a confessional act.²⁵ Certainly the teaching of both Paul and James is congenial to the confessional nature of justifying faith, to which they in effect call attention by appealing to Genesis 15:6 in their discussions of the subject. Indeed, the confessional aspect of faith constitutes something of a link between their respective emphases, as Paul counteracts the abuse of Moses and James corrects what amounts to a distortion of Paul.

To James, the confessional appropriation of God's promises would be one way in which true faith comes to that validating, godly expression which distinguishes it from, for example, the shuddering belief of demons. And it would never have occurred to Paul that the sharpness of his distinction between faith and works would be blurred by introducing into the delineation of justifying faith the element of its overt profession. His contrast of faith to works has nothing to do with the distinction between inward and outward, between heart and lips (or hands). His thought rather moves in the judicial

²⁵ See Rom. 4:3, 17; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:23.

sphere as he distinguishes between the appropriation of promissory gifts proffered by divine grace and the expectation of wages paid as legal due for services rendered. More than that, Paul explicitly correlates believing in the heart and confessing with the lips as twin aspects of saving-justifying faith. The word of faith which he preached was at once on the lips and in the heart.²⁶ Perhaps Paul's understanding of Genesis 15:6 has been preserved for us in spite of his following the text of the traditional versions in his direct quotations of the verse. For what he says in 2 Corinthians 1:20 sounds like the faith-witness of Abram's "Amen" transposed into a New Testament key: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God" (RSV).

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²⁶ See Rom. 10:5 ff., especially verses 8-10. Paul thus stood in the tradition of the ancient treaties where we find the emphasis that the taking of the oath must be a matter of both the lips and the heart. See R. Frankena, "The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon and the Dating of Deuteronomy," in *Oudtestamentische Studiën* (Leiden: E. J. Brill), XIV (1965), 140 f. Cf. Ps. 78:36 ff.