Abraham's Conception of God and Righteousness Through Faith*

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Abraham was justified by God because of his faith alone before he received the sign of circumcision which was then kept by the Israelites, his descendants. According to Paul and later Luther, justified Christians who were not born as Jews are similar to Abraham, although they more specifically believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Without any creeds of Judaism or Christianity, Abraham's conception of God was not deep and abstract as today's theology allows, but his experience was recorded in the Genesis by Moses under oral tradition and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Many present Christians worldwide hold that despite their own limited understanding of God and his revelation in the *Bible* which has been fully written, they are justified or may be justified, so they are comparable to Abraham. The righteousness of God never changes. Not only can we comprehend the gradual revelation of God in the *Bible*, but we also can study the consistence of faith and righteousness in the Old and New Testament through Abraham, and thus we can better understand the justification faith through grace of Luther who holds a realistic view on the concept of church as does Paul. Compared with the faith defined by Aquinas who represents the medieval standard, the one defined by Luther is more consistent with what the Apostle Paul teaches. In conclusion, the paper supports the translation of the *Bible* with realism.

Keywords: Abraham, God, faith, righteousness

Abraham (2166-1991 BC)¹ was the forefather of the Israelites. It was Abraham who first received from the Lord God the circumcision (Genesis 17:9-14) which is required by Judaism as a physical sign for all Jewish males. Abraham's faith, expressed by his belief, was accredited by God as righteousness (Genesis 15:6) and this is the standpoint of Moses (1526-1406 BC) comparing with the righteousness when the Israelites had the Law (Deuteronomy 6:25). The Lord is righteous; he judges the sinful while the righteous will not be condemned after death. At the time of Abraham, no single book of the *Bible* had been written, and unlike Moses and the prophets of the Old Testament or the apostles of the New Testament, Abraham himself was not one of the authors who wrote down the revelation of God. For the term God, there are three different nouns in Chinese which are used in Biblical translation, Shen (神), Shangdi (上帝), and Tianzhu (天主), among which the first is used by this paper. Obviously, Abraham's understanding of God has many limitations, since his knowledge of the Lord came mainly from his personal experience and the Lord God did not speak very much to

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¹ For historical dates, related verses, and notes, this paper refers to the NIV Study Bible, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506, USA, 1978.

him during his long lifetime. According to Apostle Paul in Romans 5:1, Christians in the New Testament period are accredited by God as righteous because of faith, just like Abraham in the Old Testament. Being a Jew from birth but with Roman citizenship, Paul is widely considered to be the most qualified and reliable theologian of his time since he loved truth more than he loved the people of his own race and he became a faithful witness of the gospel before the Gentiles. It is noteworthy that Paul did not use his own conversion as an example of grace and justification faith in the book of Romans, since his conception of God changed immediately after a vision (Acts 9:1-6). However, even now, many Christians in the world are still without the *Bible* or cannot read the *Bible* in Hebrew, Greek, or even in their native languages because of insufficient education, restriction, or persecution, although the *Bible* has been completed and circulated for about 2,000 years. They may be righteous by faith or they may hold themselves as being righteous by faith in God's sight, and in that way, their case is similar to that of Abraham who lived as an alien in the world. Now, if we study Abraham's conception of God, not only can we comprehend the gradual revelation of God, but we also can understand the consistence of faith and righteousness in the Old and New Testaments. When Paul praised justified Christians, he was writing in Greek since many of them had no Jewish background or language skills in Hebrew. Actually, without being conscious of reason serving faith, Paul was supporting realism (Wild, 1948) philosophically in that just like Elohim in Hebrew; Theos (Urmsen, 1990) in Greek can be employed as the most proper term indicating the same ultimate object for faith. However, although the New Testament was written in Greek, it had little connection with Greek philosophy which appeared centuries earlier and never had an idea of God who created the world from nothing. Moved by the same Holy Spirit, the New Testament authors wrote in Greek just like former authors did in Hebrew. Christians consider the complete book of the *Bible* as a work of the Spirit through human hands in Hebrew and Greek. Come near to God and he will come near to you (James 4:8). The most reliable way to come near to God is to read the *Bible*, if a believer has one. When it comes to people outside Hebrew and Greek, they first believe the gospel of Jesus Christ in their native tongue, such as English, German, or Chinese whose speakers had no chance of witnessing the facts and miraculous signs in Biblical times but just accept them with faith. We cannot say the English or the Chinese *Bible* is a work moved by the Spirit, but because of realism, we can translate the *Bible* from Hebrew and Greek as closely as possible and we can have different versions of translation. For Augustine (354-430), the *Septuagint* has the most authority of the Old Testament in Greek versions of translation (Augustine, 1999). Therefore, for the author's case, the Chinese term "Shen" can represent the supreme object of faith although "Shen" itself had other meanings in ancient Chinese works before it was employed to stand for Elohim and Theos. It is easy to see that Christians of languages other than Hebrew are all realists practically, as were Augustine, Martin Luther (1483-1546), and Thomas Aquinas (1224/5-1274). Although Paul could speak Hebrew (Acts 21:40), he wrote in Greek and thus was a realist himself. In addressing the universal value of Paul's epistles to a specific church, Luther was also a realist philosophically (Luther, 1999) who later translated the *Bible* into German.

Gradual Revelation

In Egypt, Moses received the best education of the world since he was bought up as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter (Acts 7:20-22). As the leader of the Israelites, he received the Law from God after he led his people out of Egypt, the land of slavery. Moses wanted to tell the Israelites that they were descendants of Abraham and God had kept his promise to Abraham (Genesis 15:13-15). By a normal time calculation, the day

when Moses led the Exodus in 1446 BC was the 15th of the first month in Jewish calendar (Exodus 12:1-13). It was three months later that God proclaimed the Law to Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:1). Inspired by the Spirit of God (Deuteronomy 34:9), Moses gave a reliable biography of Abraham based on oral tradition of the Israelites, who should be proud of having such a great ancestor. It is reasonable to conclude that Moses wrote the Pentateuch only after he had received the Law (Deuteronomy 31:9, 24), since in it, all Israelites knew the Moabites were their enemies (Numbers 25:1-2) (Rad, 1972).

The name of Abraham means "father of many" and formerly Abraham was called Abram meaning *Exalted Father*.² Terah, the father of Abraham, worshiped other gods (Joshua 24:2), while Moses had no record of Abraham's earlier life. The Lord twice called Abraham out of the land where he was living, first in Ur of Mesopotamia, and then in Haran (Acts 7:2-4) when he was already 75 years old and his father Terah was still alive (Genesis 11:32, Hebrews 11:8-9).

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you". (Genesis 12:1-3)

What the Lord said to Abram was relational without a covenant name and it has no revelation on the infinity of God, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. Neither did the Lord say something comparable to: "God is a spirit (John 4:24); God is light (1 John 1:5); God is love (1 John 4:8)". Hence, Abram should be unclear about what God is and what moral attributes God has. If one realizes his or her limitations in the world, one would generally take God for the creator whom Moses defines (Genesis 1:1). The Lord, YHWH in Hebrew, is more specific, since it is the name of God who revealed the *Bible* and who made covenant with the Israelites, his chosen people. And Moses knew this covenant began with Abram whom he wrote about. It was only through Moses that the Lord declared his eternity, holiness, righteousness, and love for the Israelites who left Egypt. Because of the influence of Terah and people in Haran, Abram would have been taught to take the moon as god that never spoke. Despite this bad start, Abram developed to the point that he obeyed the Lord who spoke, simply for a blessing and also for a blessing for others through his obedience. Unlike Moses and Paul, his descendants who had a clear racial identity (Exodus 2:1-10, Philippians 3:5-7), Abram had a more simple mind. The Lord did not call Abram to be a king to rule in a new land. Leaving his father, Abram could be more independent and thus more individual in developing his relation with God.

Abram first built an altar for the Lord after he arrived at Canaan from Haran where the Lord appeared to him (Genesis 12:6-7). This appearance of the Lord assured Abram that he was now in the place promised by the Lord. It was Noah who began altar building for open worshiping of the Lord (Genesis 8:20). Abram had just finished a rather arduous journey, since it was about 600 kms from Haran to Canaan, so Abram should be grateful to the Lord when he arrived safely. The Lord did not require Abram to build the altar but rather Abram decided himself to commemorate the location where the Lord appeared. This commemoration indicates that in one respect, Abram was against the gods worshiped by the local Canaanites and in another he was unclear that the Lord could be omnipresent and so there was no need to remember the specific location where God had appeared. Later, his grandson Jacob (2006-1859 BC) at first did not comprehend and accept that the Lord could be everywhere either (Genesis 28:16-22), since at that time people of different places worshiped different gods,

² Notes on Genesis 17:5.

such as the moon god in Haran, Baal in Canaan, and the sun god in Egypt (Genesis 41:45). The altar built by Abram may be of stones or mounds without any inscriptions on its surface. The second time Abram when built an altar for the Lord, it was to call on the name of the Lord (Genesis 12:8), indicating that Abram believed not only that the Lord had a distinct name from others but also that the Lord could speak to him and hear his petition. Being a descendant of Shem, Abram might be sure now, that who led him from Haran to Canaan, was who blessed Shem through Noah (Genesis 9:26), since Noah died when Abram was about 60 years old according to a calculation from Genesis 11:10-26. However, Abram might have held that the Lord would only hear his prayer after an altar had been built for his name's sake.

When Abram called on the name of the Lord for the second time, he had returned to Canaan from Egypt and was at the location between Bethel and Ai where his second altar for the Lord was built (Genesis 13:3-4). At this time, Abram might have offered practical prayers and thanks before the Lord, since he came to realize that the Lord's protection and grace was with him when he was in Egypt. It was his lack of faith in the Lord that led Abram to leave the Promised Land for Egypt when there was a famine in Canaan. In Egypt, the then most powerful and prosperous country in the world, Abram deceived Pharaoh by saying his wife Sarai was his sister because he feared being killed (Genesis 12:10-20). Having escaped from the Pharaoh, Abram should have some experience of the power of the Lord so that on his return from Egypt he trusted the Lord more.

When Abram separated from Lot his nephew, he finally left his people and his father's household and thus he had obeyed the requirements fully when the Lord called him in Haran. He got his promised land from the Lord after he willingly gave the Jordanian plain, already in his sight, to Lot by letting him have the first choice. Being a grateful person, Abram again built an altar, the third one, for the Lord (Genesis 13:18).

When Abram met Melchizedek, priest and king of Salem who blessed him, he replaced God Most High of the Canaanites with the name of the Lord. Thus, Abram corrected Melchizedek's conception of God and it was also a bold witness of his faith in the Lord. This was the first time recorded by Moses that Abram spoke publicly the name of the Lord and swore by it. At that time, the Canaanites worshiped many gods among which there was a leading one believed to be God Most High and the Creator of heaven and earth, and Melchizedek was the priest of God Most High (Genesis 14:18-22). Being an alien, Abram showed the simplicity and courage of his faith when he became a witness of the Lord in whom he believed before the priest of God Most High.

In contrast with what the Lord said formerly when he called Abram, the words of the Lord this time was still relational, and they made Abram retrospective of the long journey he had been experiencing with the Lord.

He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heaven and count the stars—if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:5-6)

Being an old man with great estates, Abram lived in Canaan as an alien. He had been victorious in local warfare, in which he was involved to help his nephew Lot, but he feared others might take revenge for that. In despair, he wanted Eliezer, one of his servants, to be his heir since Lot his nephew to whom Abram would like to give his estates had left him again for Sodom. Being childless, Abram had no hope. But Abram took the Lord as his personal Lord and thought his having a son would depend on the Lord. In ancient times, a husband would normally blame his wife if she did not bear any children. From his experience from Ur to Canaan, Abram was assured of the true living Lord and also his promise about the future. Here, the Lord was Abram's reliance and he made his promise to Abram clearer. The faith of Abram is seen because he entrusted himself to the Lord.

This was the third time that Lord gave a promise to Abram, and the faith of Abram was accepted by God in the sight of Moses who first used faith to restore a true and historical Abram. Comparably similar to the confession of Paul (Timothy 1:12), Abram knew whom he believed. Before this occasion, Abram had faith when he obeyed the word of the Lord but he had it more for a blessing. Moses does not mention whether the Spirit of the Lord was with Abram after this occasion.

Having his faith credited by the Lord as righteousness, Abram had a new beginning in his relationship with the Lord. Was this only an understanding or judgment of Moses? Was Abram himself clear about his being credited by the Lord as righteous? Or did Abram know he was already a righteous man? Moses had a concrete conception of righteousness only after he had received the Law (Deuteronomy 6:25). Therefore, it is natural for Judaism to hold that one is righteous by obeying the Law after it was given, while being righteous simply by faith was appropriate when there was none. Since Judaism believes that the Law was given by the Lord through Moses, its way of being righteous is faith plus works. Formerly when Abram built altars, he did not bring offerings, which implies that he might be unclear about his sin or being born sinful. It was Cain and Abel, the sons of Adam, who first brought offerings before the Lord (Genesis 4:4). This time, God commanded Abram to bring a heifer, a goat, and a ram, along with a dove and a pigeon, as offerings, and Abram's obedience and faith was accepted by the Lord who made a covenant with him (Genesis 15:9-21).

Without the Law, Abram had more freedom to do what was against the will of God. Later, being led out of Egypt, a land of slavery, the Israelite enjoyed a kind of freedom, mainly politically. In his final addressing to the Israelite, Joshua, the successor to Moses, brought out a faith of personal free choice before the elders who collectively gave a definite answer to believe the Lord (Joshua 24:16-18), since they, in the past, witnessed the miraculous signs of the Lord. The concept of freedom, in the sense of man's sovereignty over himself, his own decisions, was a concept unknown to the Greeks before they accepted Christianity (Mondin, 1991).

The Lord definitely promised Abram that he would have a son. After a long waiting period of 10 years, Abram became doubtful and impatient about the power of the Lord. Following the advice of his wife Sarai, he took Hagar, a maidservant of Sarai, as his concubine and she bore him a son Ishmael when he was 86 years old (Genesis 16:1-16). This impatience with the promise was for Abram a grave failure in his personal relationship with the Lord and also a failure in his actions since it caused disharmony within his own family. Before Abram took Hagar, he apparently had not inquired of the Lord who had assured him of a son. Abram obeyed Sarai rather than the Lord because with his own strength and wisdom he wished to fulfill the plan of the Lord. Since then, the Lord had given no vision to Abram for 13 years.

When Abram was 99 years old, the Lord appeared to him again with the first words, "I am God Almighty" and asked him to be perfect (Genesis 17:1-22), which means Abram should trust the Lord wholeheartedly and be morally perfect. Hence, a man who has been credited as righteous may actually have failures in deeds and is possibly without a mature understanding of God. In the case of Abram, he might have been unclear that the Lord Almighty cannot do anything against his nature and he cannot change the past and he cannot answer the prayer of a person who asks capriciously. In this appearance, the Lord made a formal covenant with Abram and his descendants, memorializing it by the rite of circumcision, and he renamed Abram Abraham and Sarai Sarah.³ Abram got a new name when he was nearly 100 years old; the name represented the blessing of the

³ Both Sarai and Sarah means princess but Sarah stressed that she was to be the mother of nations and kings, notes of the NIV Bible, p. 31.

Lord and a new beginning in his life, and he had circumcision as the sign of the covenant. It was the Lord who credited Abraham as righteous who also made this covenant of grace. However, Abraham, at this time, was still doubtful of the omnipotence of the Lord, as shown by the fact that he did not believe that being such an old man would have a son and his wife Sarah of age ninety would bear one. Soon after this, he ran out of the entrance of his tent at the great trees of Mamre to greet and bow low before three men whom he saw standing facing him. It was the Lord who appeared to Abraham through his three angels (Genesis 18:1-8). Abraham had a spiritual discerning and caring for travelers which was later praised by the New Testament (Hebrew 13:2).

Morally, the righteousness and the mercy of the Lord co-exist. The family of Lot lived in Sodom where the people were adulterous (Genesis 19:4-5), arrogant, and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy (Ezekiel 16:49). When the Lord was about to destroy Sodom because of its sin, Abraham interceded six times for Lot's family to be spared and he assumed there were righteous people (a minimum of 10, only two more than when Noah's family was saved because of the ark) in the wicked Sodom. This intercession showed the love of Abraham for Lot's family. Maybe because of haste, Abraham did not build an altar to inquire of the Lord whom he could face directly with awe. He began to use the terms of the righteous and the wicked, since the acts of the righteous people were accredited by the Lord as righteousness and so they would not be judged. Abraham's appeal was founded on a belief, moreover, that God spared the wicked if there were righteous people living with them (Genesis 18:24-25).

At this moment, Abraham was quite sure that he was righteous because he believed what the Lord had said to him. Though Lot was not as righteous as he was, Abraham held his nephew to be a righteous man, since, Lot obeyed the Lord by going with Abram down to Canaan from Ur, and in Egypt Lot did not report to Pharaoh that Abraham had lied and thus hidden his true relationship with Sarai. While he had sufficient confidence in his own righteous status, Abraham also had a specific understanding of wickedness, evidenced by his condemnation of the sins of the Sodomites, such as adultery and homosexuality. It is noteworthy that Abraham never mentioned the name of Lot in his conversation with the Lord. If Abraham directly assumed that there were 10 righteous people in Sodom, he would be afraid that the Lord would not forgive the city since the righteous were so few. Earlier Lot was captured in a local war before Abraham rescued him with 318 of his trained men after a tactical fight (Genesis 14:11-16). In his pleading for Lot, Abraham was answered specifically by the Lord. Here, Abraham came closer to the Lord with an understanding of his righteousness, mercy, and holiness, even though it may have seemed contradictory to Abraham that righteousness and mercy could co-exist. But for Abraham, the Lord is a judge on evil and he controls human life and death; he is a living God who hears the pleading of the righteous. Moses recorded all these for the Israelites to be sure that the righteous would be separate from the wicked when God judges.

Abraham's faith in the Lord also influenced Sarah his wife and Lot who once followed him. In the New Testament, Sarah was praised as an example of the holy women in the past who were submissive to their husbands (1 Peter 3:5-6) and Lot is praised as righteous (2 Peter 2:7). Lot had spiritual discerning when he entertained two angels and finally left Sodom the city of evil with his wife and two daughters. Compared with Abraham, Lot had much weaker faith in the Lord and had been more attracted to worldly temptations; his wife lost her life outside Sodom because she disobeyed the command of the Lord. Influenced by the adulterous Sodomites, Lot's two daughters both had incestuous relations with him and bore sons (Genesis 19:1-38); one became the father of the Moabites and the other the father of the Ammonites. Since the Moabites and the Ammonites failed to help the Israelites when they came out of Egypt, they were banned from entering the

assembly of the Lord in the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 23:3).

The Lord is the equivalent of the eternal God when Moses wrote: "Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the Eternal God (Genesis 21:33)". The life of God is eternal since the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting (Exodus 3:14), without beginning and end. It is only through faith in Jesus Christ that sinners can have the eternal life of God (John 3:16). Abraham might have had no knowledge of his being born sinful but according to the law of conscience (Romans 2:14-15), he should have realized his sins, such as his deception in Egypt and taking Hagar as a concubine, together with the sins of the Sodomites who had disappeared in the raging fire of the Lord. Here, Abraham had no altar set up but he called on the Lord after he planted the tree symbolizing life. The Lord must have blessed that tree to allow it to survive in a dry terrain. Since human death means a departure of soul from the body (James 2:26), the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah should reveal to Abraham that people were punished because of the sins they commit and there would be judgment after death (Hebrews 9:27). However, those who have eternal life would not be condemned by the Lord after they die; Abraham had finally come to understand the eternity of the Lord when he was so advanced in age. Once fearing to be starved to death in Canaan, Abram fled to Egypt but maybe later his grandson Jacob had a clearer picture on what would happen after death (Genesis 37:35)⁴. Longing for eternal life, Abraham called on the Lord who holds eternal life since he had seen the formidable destiny of the people in the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The promise of the Lord came true when at the age of one hundred Abraham had his son Isaac born from Sarah (Genesis 21:1-3). No longer would he doubt the omnipotence of the Lord since he could better know from his own experience the faithfulness of the Lord. For his actions, Abraham had no notion of the law yet he was accredited by the Lord as righteous not through works but through faith alone (Romans 4:17-22). But his faith in the Lord kept growing and withstood a test of the Lord. The peak of Abraham's faith in the Lord was reached when he prepared to sacrifice his beloved Isaac: "Then he reached out his hand and took the knife to slay his son (Genesis 22:10)". Abraham believed the Lord all mighty and eternal that he would not spare his son born when he was 100 years old: "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death (Hebrews 11:19)". This event happened when Isaac was old enough to carry wood, so we can conclude that Isaac was over 10 years old and thus Abraham's faith in the Lord had been growing and continuing for more than 30 years since he was first accredited by the Lord as righteous. Although he had such a moving action accompanying his faith, his righteousness did not come from sacrificing Isaac: "Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did (James 2:21-22)".

Five times, the Lord had promised Abraham that his descendants would be a great nation (Genesis 12:2, 13:14-17, 15:5, 17:1-8, 22:15-18), but it was not until when his son Isaac (2066-1886 BC) was 60 years old that the twins Esau and Jacob, his grandsons, were born. Circumcision is a sign of Abraham being declared righteous, while sacrificing Isaac was his most outstanding deed after his righteousness through faith. Abraham was blessed by the Lord with a long life span. When he died at the age of 175 (Genesis 25:7), Jacob was about 15 years old and had not yet inherited the covenant through which would flow the blessing of the Lord. Moses wrote no complaints about Abraham's continuing faith in the Lord, even though Abraham had no conception of

⁴ Note on the Hebrew word Sheol.

theology and he only had the word of the Lord as a revelation. Although Abraham did not record any scriptures to glorify his experience, he definitely told people in his household what he had heard and seen (Genesis 17:23). In the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, Jesus mentioned that Abraham is in a blessed state set apart by a chasm where there is a place of torment for unsaved people after their death (Luke 16:19-31). The Apostle Paul tells us (Romans 1:18-20) that there is no doubt that Abraham had an innate idea of God who unexpectedly appeared to him.

Righteousness Through Faith

Although it is Paul who elucidates thoroughly the doctrine of righteousness through faith, the gospel books record Jesus also explaining that sinners cannot be justified before God through works but only by faith, using parables, such as the Lost Son (Luke 15:11-32) and the Workers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Unlike a parable, in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), Jesus concluded that Abraham is now in the kingdom of God and the Lord whom Abraham trusted is Jesus himself (John 8:56-58). For the Jews, to be justified by God is to observe the Law of Moses in the Old Testament, and that means righteousness through faith plus works (Deuteronomy 6:25). Being of the chosen people of the Lord, a Jewish male has the sign of circumcision physically. Among the Ten Commandments, the core of the Law, keeping the Sabbath is the most important for Judaism (Exodus 20:8-11), while Abraham had no conception of Sabbath.

Paul is famous for justification through faith which is stated in the Romans and he develops that doctrine from "The righteous will live by faith" and the example of Abraham. After more than 1000 years, that doctrine again influenced Martin Luther, the forerunner of the Reformation, who used it in 1517 as a banner against the Catholic way of salvation.

In the apostolic church period when Paul was preaching the gospel, people joined the church through being baptized (Romans 6:3-4). Many Christians had Jewish ancestry or were first believers of Judaism; besides circumcision, they still kept the Sabbath and ate the clean food required by the Law of Moses. Therefore, outwardly those Jewish Christians looked very like the Jews of Judaism. Later, the church included Gentiles who were linguistically or culturally Greeks with different customs, but Jewish Christians still had the leadership positions in the church. Although most Jews rejected Jesus as their Savior and Christianity was regarded by Romans as a persecuted sect among Judaism, Gentiles were embracing the Messiah who does not show partiality to people without Jewish ancestry. Did a Gentile need to be circumcised to first become a Jew if he believed in Jesus Christ and wanted have a membership in the church? This would be ridiculous for a Chinese to join the church in the nineteenth century when the gospel began to win sinners in late Qing Empire (1644-1911), but it was really a problem at that time. For example, Timothy had a Jewish mother but a Gentile father. During his second missionary trip, Paul wanted Timothy to join him at Lystra, and because of the pressure of the Jews in Lystra and Iconium, Timothy was circumcised (Acts 16:1-3).

The Jews took it for granted that they would be justified by God if they observed the Law of Moses. Actually, such a view means being justified comes from good works or faith plus good works. The Jews desired to be righteous, so that after death, they will not be condemned by the righteous God. The Greek adjective for righteous is *dikaios*, a legal term once used by ancient Greek philosophers (Urmson, 1990), meaning justice, just and to act justly; while the noun form of righteousness is *dikaionee*. In the translation of the Chinese Union *Bible* (1919), the noun expression 义人 represents an adjective in Greek which is equivalent to the righteous (a righteous man in single form but righteous men in plural form) in English. The

opposite of the righteous is the unrighteous and the wicked, but the redemptive work of Jesus Christ was prepared for all who believe and God does not show favoritism (Romans 2:11). In the gospels, Jesus Christ gives teachings on the righteous and righteousness, the unrighteous, and the sinners. Besides the Lost Son and Workers at the Vineyard, he taught about the different prayers of the Pharisees and the tax collectors at the Holy Temple (Luke 18:9-14) and his instruction indicates that sinners cannot be forgiven by God through works but only because of repentance from heart through faith. Now, how can sinners be justified by God through faith, by believing God plus observing the Law of Moses or believing Jesus Christ as one's savior, and trusting him always? Naturally, the question is related to *pisteu* and *pistis*, respectively the verb and noun form in Greek corresponding to the English equivalents of believe and faith. *Pistis*, belief in god, appeared in the Republic by Plato (428-348 BC) (Urmson, 1990). The meaning of *pistis* is faith, belief, and trust with God as its ultimate object, because it is defined: "Now faith is being sure of we hope for and certain of we do not see (Hebrew 11:1)". Now, we can see that faith is not feeling or tuition. Neither is faith knowledge nor is it conjecture.

Obviously, faith is related to one's willing trust of another with whom one's life can be renewed, since faith is not sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). This faith is distinct from faith used in everyday life when the object of faith is not God, since the latter one is only a practical knowledge or a preposition taken as true, like the statement "The earth moves around the sun". When the Lord created Adam, he gave him free will to choose (Genesis 2:16-17). Rationally, Adam understood the meaning of the Lord's command that he was not allowed to eat the forbidden fruit although no one had experienced death before him. The fact is that Adam did not believe the Lord from his heart but abused his free will in breaking the command, because he could not resist the temptation from Satan to be independent.

Although a sinner is saved because of faith in Jesus Christ the Savior, he should willingly continue his faith after that, and in this life, do his work according to the teachings of Jesus. Thus, there are three kinds of faith regarding God: faith of knowledge, saving faith, and faith after salvation. What Luther was against is faith of knowledge, a rationalized faith influenced by Aristotelian philosophy (Luther, 1999), such as that expressed in the prepositions regarding the creeds or the existence of God in the Five Ways (Aquinas, 1948). With this kind of faith of knowledge, a sinner would find it unimportant to repent and confess sins from his heart. In the *Summa Theologica*, his most representative work, Aquinas defines faith in a completely rational way: to believe is an act of the intellect, in so far as the will moves it to assent.⁵

Intellect and will are two spiritual abilities of people. Since the Apostle John uses logos, the Stoic concept of cosmological principle, in the beginning of his gospel to indicate the divine nature of Jesus to readers with some philosophical background, Aquinas holds the primacy of intellect which is closely related with logos (Swiezawski, 1995) and in this way, faith under Aquinas's definition is actually knowledge plus conjecture, not a commitment and surrender of one's will to God. A commitment to God in one's faith is not tuition or bet. It is through faith that one builds and restores a broken relationship with God in this life and faith is not merely knowledge with which one just understands and accepts the creeds. Since one has soul and body, he has abilities not only of sense and reason, but also of spirit. Considering the ability of the soul, Aquinas focuses more on intellect than on will which is defined as a rational appetite. Among the above kinds of faith, the latter two are mutually related since a saved sinner should have lasting and growing faith in Jesus Christ because of

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q.2, A.2.

the indwelling Holy Spirit. For a sinner to be saved, he must at least form a will in his heart to accept the unseen Jesus Christ as his personal Savior after he has heard the gospel. One would fall into the heretic trap of Pelagianism if he grants one's willing has a part in personal salvation that it assists God in saving his soul, since even the human will itself is given by God (1 Corinthians 4:7). When a sinner restores his relationship with God in willing acceptance of Jesus, he actually obeys God who gave him the will and in receiving God's grace he treats God as God and does not abuse his will any longer. Therefore, a sinner needs no good works beforehand to be saved but only needs to believe Jesus, just like one of the criminals crucified with him who took Jesus as his Lord (Luke 23:39-43). Paul concludes: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast (Ephesians 2:8-9)".

How can a sinner be declared righteous before God? Must a Gentile sinner be circumcised when he believes in Jesus and joins the church? Must a Jewish Christian observe the Law of Moses? What is the value of being born a Jew and the Law of Moses? How in the church should the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians treat each other? What is the relation of believing Jesus as one's Savior and the righteousness of Abraham the father of the Israelites? These were the problems about which the young Roman church in the first century was unclear.

Rome had a Jewish section and some of the Jews became Christians at the time of the Pentecost (Acts 2:10). When they brought the gospel back from Jerusalem to Rome, the local Jews were divided because of Jesus, in that the Emperor Claudius (reigned from 41-54 AD) using this pretext forced them leave (Acts 18:2). Among the Jews who left Rome, there was a Christian couple named Aquila and Priscilla who were tent makers and who went to Corinth in the mainland Greece, where they later became co-workers of Paul when he was on his second missionary trip. Aquila and Priscilla followed Paul from Corinth to Syria. Later, they stayed in Ephesus while Paul returned to Jerusalem. Andronicus and Junia, Paul's relatives, believed Jesus before Paul did, and the two were in Rome when Paul was writing the Epistle (Romans 16:7). Although Paul had not yet been to Rome, he could know a lot about the situation of the Roman church through Aquila, Priscilla, and his own relatives. After the persecution ended, some Jews went back to Rome again, like the couple Aquila and Priscilla (Romans 16:3-5), but this time, the Roman church was different. Since the leadership of the church was dominated by Gentile Christians who were now the majority (Romans 11:13), some problems became more outstanding and needed to be explained by an authority. This was the historical background leading to Paul writing the Epistle of Romans.

When he wrote to the Romans from Corinth in 57 AD, Paul was longing for a visit to Rome since it was the capital of the Empire and it would be a new achievement if he could bring the gospel to Rome from Palestine, an eastern corner of the great Empire. And further, through Rome, Paul wanted to preach the gospel in Spain, the westernmost end of the known world. Before the epistle of Romans, Paul had already written 1 Corinthians⁶ which explains the resurrection, a conception once only held by the Jews, together with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in regenerated Christians. Due to the circulation of his earlier epistles, the authority of Paul should be known by the Roman church. Although Rome was in the Latin region, Greek was widely understood in some communities since the capital city had settlers from all parts of the Empire. Paul's epistle was carried to the Roman church by Phoebe, a female believer at the church of Cenchrea (Romans 16:1).

⁶ The NIV Study Bible: Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506, U.S.A. p. 1733.

Paul had a confident understanding of the universal and impartial righteousness of God:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith". (Romans 1:16-17)

In the gospels, Jesus was crucified on the cross and suffered a very humiliating way of execution. However, Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, since the innocent Jesus, the son of God who died on the cross, had paid the penalty to the righteous God to whom all sinners own a debt for their sin and the resurrected Jesus had accomplished a redemptive work for sinners who believe. To preach the gospel is a command given to the disciples by Jesus, who promised his power working with the good news (Matthew 28:18-20). The righteousness of the righteous comes from a lasting faith in the gospel and Jesus Christ.

In proclaiming righteousness, Paul refers to the word of the prophet Habakkuk in the Old Testament (Habakkuk 2:4). When Habakkuk received messages of the Lord, the northern kingdom of Israel had perished while the southern kingdom of Judah where he lived had forsaken the Lord who seemed to not interfere in its society full of injustice, violence and evil. The Lord told Habakkuk that he would raise up the ruthless Babylonians as a punishment to invade the land of Judah where the people were sinning so much. This strategy made the prophet puzzled and confused with weaker faith in the righteousness of the Lord because the Babylonians were even more unrighteous than the people of Judah, so how could their success be an appropriate punishment for Judah? Thus, the Lord let the prophet believe that the Babylonians would only be his tool and they would be surely punished for their cruelties and conceit. Habakkuk then concluded that the righteous who trust the Lord would live in distress. From the righteous will live by faith, a prophecy of Habakkuk, came the gospel of Jesus. Paul developed fully the idea into righteousness through faith (Romans 5:1), indicating a new life obtained.

Since Jews and Gentiles are all descendants of Adam, they are the same in human nature and they have no different ways in salvation. Then, what is the advantage of being a Jew who is the same race as Paul himself? Paul states that the word of God was first revealed to the Jews through the Old Testament (Romans 3:1-2) and so the Jews should be witnesses of God. The gospel gives the Jews a chance of salvation (Romans 11:1-7). If this is true, what is the function of the Law of Moses? Before he repented and accepted Jesus, Paul was a Pharisee who strictly observed the Law. He clearly sees that through the Law the Israelites know what a specific sin is (Romans 3:20).

In traditional Jewish thought, observing the Law brings righteousness. But Abraham, their father, was accredited as righteous by God when there was no Law, simply because Abraham believed God. He received the sign of circumcision from the Lord after he was accredited as righteous. Although Abraham was not a moral teacher, he was regarded as the moral example who gained justification through works by the Jews at that time.⁷ Circumcision is a physical sign that an Israelite male is one of the Lord's chosen people. Now, comes the problem in the Roman church. Should the Gentile be circumcised after believing in Jesus? Or should a Gentile first convert to Judaism in order to be saved? Paul argues that circumcision stands for Abraham's justification faith since he was accredited as righteous by the Lord not after he was circumcised but before (Romans 4:1-12).⁸

⁷ Notes on Romans 4:1.

⁸ His nephew Lot would not have had circumcision but is regarded as a righteous man in the New Testament.

Righteousness through faith focuses on a direct relationship between a sinner and God. In contrast, righteousness through works and righteousness through observing the Law are without doubt more focused on relations between people, which implies that a sinner can be praised by others or feel righteousness by himself (Matthew 6:1-17). Because of human weaknesses, no one can observe the whole Law (James 2:10). According to the Law of Moses, the Israelites had to communicate with the Lord through priests who were chosen from the tribe of Levi and among whom Aaron the elder brother of Moses was the first high priest (Exodus 28:1-29). Later, the priests in turn served the Lord in the Holy temple of Jerusalem. By Judaism, Jesus was born in the tribe of Judah not Levi and thus he was ineligible for the holy priesthood. How do the Christians who are justified through faith have relations with the priesthood? Since the Gentiles did not have much knowledge about the Judaic priesthood, Paul did not write much on it, either. It was other apostles of Jesus like Peter who perfected the justification faith proclaimed by Paul first in the Romans. The priesthood is no longer a profession reserved for the Levites but a calling for every Christian (1 Peter 2:9). The priesthood prefigures Jesus, the great high priest who would fulfill and end the earthly priesthood of Judaism through his redemptive work:

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sin, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. (Hebrews 7:26)

Because of the sin Adam committed, sin entered the world and his descendants were all born sinful, separated from God. There is no righteous man (Romans 3:10-12) because the righteous are actually sinners accredited by God and thus saved sinners by God's grace. As for Abraham's example, he acted against the will of God after he was accredited by the Lord as righteous, in that he took Hagar as his concubine since he lacked faith in the promise of the Lord. Therefore, the righteous who are saved sinners should continue to repent and live holy lives to glorify God, sinning less and less.

Being physically the descendants of Abraham, the Jews were God's covenant people and they were proud of their racial identity and moral standard. Being a member of the Jewish race himself, Paul was greatly distressed that his fellow Jews did not believe the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although he loved the people of his own race, Paul loved truth more since he was convinced that the truth of salvation is revealed in the gospel:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. (Romans 9:1-4)

Earlier in the same epistle, being a justified sinner himself, Paul states that his love comes from God through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5).

The Jews believe in the Lord as the one true God and they hold that righteousness comes from obeying the Law, but for Paul, their assertion gives evidence of a self-centered way of imagination. Since Jesus has fulfilled the Law of Moses, anyone who believes in God but rejects Jesus as Messiah the Savior would not be obeying the righteousness of God: "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes (Romans 10:4)". Later, in interpreting the righteousness of God, Luther distinguishes a Latin and a Hebrew understanding, the former meaning the righteousness God possesses and the latter, which was used by Paul whom Luther admires, meaning the righteousness that saved sinners have from God and in the sight of God (Luther, 1999).

Conclusion

It is Moses who first recorded the story of Abraham but Paul who argued for righteousness through faith. And Moses used to be a man of impulsive justice since he at age of 40 killed an Egyptian slave driver (Exodus 2:11-12) while Paul once gave approval of the death of Steven (Acts 7:57-8:1). Nevertheless, we can conclude that Abraham, Moses and Paul were all world-class great people of their time, for both Abraham and Moses had won in Egypt when they encountered Pharaoh, ruler of the most powerful country, and moreover Abraham became the father of the Israelites and Moses began the mono-theistic religion of Judaism. Paul is similarly great because he brought the gospel to the non-Jewish people and he was even a greater scholar than Moses. Paul loved his fellow Jews. However, he loved truth more, because truth is the word of the gospel (Ephesians 1:13). There was neither the Law nor Judaism nor Christianity in Abraham's time and he had no notion of the triune God of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Abraham worshiped the same God as the later believers of Jesus (John 8:56, 58) since there is no change in the righteousness of God whose nature is immutable and whose righteousness is more explicitly revealed through Jesus Christ (Romans 3:22). Being first a descendant of Abraham physically, Paul became a spiritual Israelite through his faith in the gospel and he put no emphasis on racial distinction. He holds that the true Israelites are spiritual, not physical and they receive a spiritual circumcision in their heart (Romans 2:28-29, 9:6). Therefore, regenerated Christians (John 3:5-8) are the spiritual Israelites and they are descendants of Abraham not by blood but by faith (Galatians 3:7). Although Paul does not use the terms trinity and original sin clearly held by Luther, Paul does give us an explanation of faith which was inherited by Luther who more specifically defines righteousness into two kinds (Luther, 1999).

From Abraham to Paul and then to Augustine, Luther, the native language changes from Hebrew to Greek and then to Latin and German. For the ancient Israelites, the Law of Moses was not only the word of the Lord, but also a living dictionary for the holy language of Hebrew. Elohim stands for the creator (Genesis 1:1). Although the New Testament was written in Greek, there were Greek works before, so the former term *Theos* used by Aristotle (384-322 BC) as a metaphysical notion and the Logos of the Stoics had a new meaning of creator when it appeared in the Biblical texts (John 1:1, 3:16). Similarly, before the *Bible* was translated into Chinese, "Shen" meaning something above people but unseen was a term in Chinese ancient works and even mentioned by Confucius (551-479 BC). With the Biblical translation, "Shen" was given a new basic meaning of creator which was originally expressed in Hebrew, together with a meaning of trinity in Christianity. Other than the Israelites, no people had the concept of Messiah but Jesus is not only the Savior for the Israelites but for all sinners, although Judaism denies Jesus being the Messiah who was crucified to death on a cross (Eckstein, 1984). Accordingly, gospel preaching in languages other than Hebrew and Greek may be blessed with the power of God who saves sinners (Matthew 28:18-20), although Jesus himself during his life on earth, spoke only Aramaic, a tongue close to Hebrew. For my part, the author is writing in English although the native tongue is Mandarin Chinese. Even without a mastery of Hebrew and Greek, the author can still comprehend faith and the righteousness related, confirming the true existence of a universal language for truth first propounded by Augustine (1993). Now for a repentant believer from Chinese culture, circumcision is not a problem at all. For a Chinese, identity is mainly linguistic with a unified written language, in which authors earlier than Confucius began to use it in recording history. But Confucius had no faith in God and he himself never claimed to be a righteous judge or a Savior of sinners. Even now, most Chinese scholars influenced by Confucianism or a mixture of Confucianism and other atheist or agnostic thoughts from the West, would like to

rank Confucius with Jesus Christ, without a proper understanding on Abraham and Moses who knew what the origin of life is. They would likely to hold that because of Confucius, it was the ancient Chinese who once had the highest moral standard in the world. But the fact is, because of the Law of Moses, the Israelite had the highest moral standard in the ancient world when China had no recorded history, because of a gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire, the West transcended the Jews morally, at least in theory. When Paul was spreading the gospel in the Greek speaking world, Greek philosophy was going on, and the last great philosophy of late antiquity, Plotinus (204-270) revised the Platonic way of salvation by a mystic union with the One in this life, not a transmigration of soul departed from its bodily prison outside time. However, being a Chinese from the Chinese, most Chinese still think in a way very similar to that of Paul before his repentance, being an Israelite from the Israelites, although they had no such a great ancestor like Abraham and no conception on a covenant relationship with God through history. With 人 meaning a person as its left part and 言 meaning spoken word as the right, the Chinese character 信 can be either a noun meaning faith or a verb meaning to believe. The author holds that 信 stands for faith of salvation, not faith of knowledge, if it accompanies righteousness accredited by God. Interestingly, for 义 meaning righteousness as a noun or to be righteous as an adjective, has been defined a moral state approvingly with its original form 義 with 羊, a sacrificial lamb above 我, the self. But in ancient Chinese works, the opposite of 義 was 利, meaning profit or near-sighted visible gains, not as derogatory as wickedness (恶) or being sinful (罪) as its case in Judaism or Christianity. For example, Confucius says in the Analects (论语): The gentleman see righteousness; the petty man sees profit (君子喻于义, 小人喻于利). Christians build no temples for either Abraham or Paul; while temples for Confucius began to be built in historical China since Emperor HanWuDi (汉武帝, 156-87 BC) raised the status of Confucianism to the highest among schools of thought. But however, without a personal Creator God as a righteous judge, Confucianism has no conception of salvation in time or outside time since it is agnostic about the ultimate origin of life. And Confucius lived a more secular life, never assuming himself as an alien in the world but defining himself a subject of certain semi-independant state from the collapsing Zhou Dynasty (周, 770-211 BC), whose founder without convincing proof as that of Saul or David being anointed king by Samuel, the high priest of God (1 Samuel 10:1, 16:1), claimed to obey the will of Heaven (天 in Chinese with a meaning close to God) and whose successors claimed to be sons of God but later with a weakening power had merely a nominal legitimacy to rule. Abraham built altars for God; Solomon, the king of Israel built a temple for God in Jerusalem for a symbol of the presence of God. However, for a righteous Christian, the saved sinner, the presence of God is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16). We can conclude that the gospel of Jesus Christ and righteousness through faith has renewed and perfected both the Judaic righteousness and the Chinese meaning of 義 and thus the translators of the *Bible* needed not to coin a new term or character for it. Therefore, the revelation of God transcends language barriers and realism lays the foundation for different people's faith in God even when their notion of God is not perfect. However, a standard and succinct definition of God can be drawn from the creeds of the church, such as the Apostle's Creed and the Nicene Creed, which can be translated into any language.

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