

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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A Treatise on Faith (4:1-25)

The argument Paul develops here is taken from the Genesis record concerning Abraham (Gen 12-25) as well as the traditions of Abraham found in the non-biblical Jewish literature (e.g., *Mishnah*, Josephus, Philo, and the Jewish Pseudepigraphal literature). In this body of material Abraham is portrayed as the father of the Jewish nation. His mark of distinction is that he was the man who, through his belief in the promises of God, brought the nation of Israel into existence. They were a people whose very existence was the result of Abraham's "faith," but they themselves were not a people of faith. Abraham was "Father Abraham" - the father of their nation - but Moses (the lawgiver) was the man of God whose personality most powerfully present in their midst. They were a people of "the Torah," not a people of "faith."

(1) An Example of Faith: the Faith of Abraham (4:1-8)

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? ²If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about--but not before God. ³What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." (Gen. 15:6; also in verse 22) ⁴Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. ⁵However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness. ⁶David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to

whom God credits righteousness apart from works: ⁷"Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. ⁸Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him."
(Psalm 32:1-2)

In these verses Paul calls Abraham forth and stands him before his readers as the example "*par excellence*" of a man whose life was acceptable to God. That which characterized his life, however, was not lawkeeping or works of the law; rather, it was faith. Because of his faith he found favor with God, and so extraordinary was his faith that he was drawn into a special relationship with God. Bruce Fieler, a Jewish writer, in his recent book on Abraham, says concerning Paul's use of Abraham in Romans 4:

Paul was one of the earliest to use Abraham as a biblical figure for the Christians as well as the Jews. To make his message more resonant with Jews he used the techniques most familiar to his audience: rabbinic *midrash* (literally, "interpretation" – mwl). He retells the story of Abraham to emphasize what he thinks is most important. (Bruce Fieler, *Abraham, A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, HarperCollins Pub. p 140)

In the 13 letters of Paul, he refers to Abraham 19 times, more than any other person than Jesus himself. Paul wanted to sidestep what he viewed as the tyranny of the law in Jewish life. He desired to circumvent the tribal particularism of Judaism, the defining characteristic of which was that all men were required to be circumcised. His argument, Abraham developed a unique relationship with God before Judaism was invented, before the law was given, even before circumcision was prescribed. Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness, (cf. Fieler, p 140)

For Paul, this is the key line in the Abraham story, and possibly the most important line in the entire Five Books of Moses. Abraham received recognition in God's eyes because he *believed* God, because he had faith that if he left his father's house and went forth as God asked, he would become a great nation. How then was it reckoned to him?" Paul asks in Rom 4:10. "Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before." This could mean only one thing; *Circumcision is not central to faith* (cf. Fieler, p 141).

That which distinguished Abraham within the Judaism of the first

century was not his exemplary faith. In the theology of the Rabbis, Abraham was considered righteous because of his obedience to God's commands - he was a man of obedience (cf. Gen 22:1-18 and 26:2-5). Even though the Hebrew term for law (*Torah*) is not used in God's dealing with Abraham, other terms meaning essentially the same thing were used. The Hebrew word "*amar*," meaning, "to speak, say, tell, give instructions or commands," is used throughout the story of Abraham in Genesis 12-25, usually translated, "God said," (Genesis 12:1, 7; 15:7, 9, 13; 16:8, 9, 10; 17:1, 19; 18:9, 17, 20, 26, 32; 21:4, 24; 22:1, etc.). In addition to this, the occurrence of the Hebrew *dabar Yahweh*, "the word of *Yahweh*," which came to Abraham in Genesis 15:4 gave place to the argument that Abraham had the "proto-torah;" i.e., the forerunner of the *Torah*, to which he was obedient. Here again, Bruce Fieler, has a very insightful observation on this point:

The Jews see Abraham as the first true keeper of the Torah, the first Jew because he was the first Hebrew to be circumcised. Since the model Jew was one who observed Mosaic law, Abraham must also observe Mosaic law. Doing so would appear problematic, however, because Moses arrives some five hundred to seven hundred years after Abraham. But the rabbis found an intriguing hook. In Gen 26, God say that Abraham obeyed my commandments, my laws, and my teachings. The rabbis interpreted this line to mean that Abraham obeyed the Torah before it was even given. Abraham speaks Hebrew, sits in a learned academy studying *midrash*, he prays, tithes, observes the laws of purity, travels to the site of the Temple (Mount Moriah). They even credited him with instituting morning prayers and was the first to use the prayer shawls (cf. Fieler, p 126)

It is a fact that Abraham was obedient to God but his was an "obedience of faith" (i.e. an obedience which resulted from his faith) not an "obedience of *Torah*" (i.e., obedience rooted in lawkeeping). At the time of Abraham's obedience to God there was no "*Torah*," no Mosaic Law; and this is a point of no little significance to Paul (cf. Rom 1:5; 16:26).

It was Abraham's "faith" that reckoned him as righteous. Paul's interpretation of the expression "reckoned to him as righteousness" is based on a Rabbinical exegetical principle (Hillel's *Middoth*) which says that any time the same word occurs in two different biblical texts, each can be used to interpret the other. The term with which we are concerned here is

"reckoned" (translated in other versions: count, impute). The Hebrew word here is *chashab*; the Greek Septuagint (which Paul quotes exactly here) uses the word *logizomai*. Both words mean to reason to or draw a conclusion about something. From what Abraham did, it could only be concluded that he was righteous. Essentially, Paul is saying that as a result of his life God concluded that he was a righteous man. Paul finds this word in Psalms 32:2, "Blessed is the man whose sin is not reckoned (*chashab/logizomai*) against him." From this Paul concludes that a man who is *reckoned* as righteous is the same as a man whose sins are not *reckoned* against him (cf Rom 4:6-8). A man who is reckoned as righteous is a man who is reckoned as not guilty of sin, and the means of becoming righteous is through faith, as was the case with Abraham.

**(2) Faith Was Abraham's Means of Righteousness Before
the Law of Moses Was given (4:9-15)**

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness.¹⁰ Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before!¹¹ And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them.¹² And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.¹³ It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith.¹⁴ For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless,¹⁵ because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

Jewish theology can emphasize such passages as Gen 22:18 and 26:5, while glossing over such a passage as Gen 15:6. Paul saw Gen 15:6 as critical to an understanding as to why Abraham did what he did. This text says clearly that Abraham's righteousness was a result of his faith - "Abraham **believed God** and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6).

Righteousness is a term for a state of being wherein one is worthy of fellowship with God. The "making righteous" of one who is at enmity with God is called "justification." One who enjoys this state of being is called "righteous." All of these words are part of a Greek word family: *dikaios* (righteous/just), *dikaioo* (to make righteous/justify), and *dikaiosis* (righteousness or the state of one having been justified). All have to do with one idea - that of a state of being wherein one is considered acceptable or approved (i.e. worthy of fellowship or a relationship).

One at enmity with God is estranged from God and cannot enjoy fellowship with God. Only those persons who are "righteous/just" before God are received into his presence. As used here in this text, righteousness is a state of being in which one is acceptable to God. His life is such that God desires fellowship or relationship with them. According to Gen 15:6, the quality of life that made Abraham righteous (desirable for fellowship) was "faith". He believed God and his belief was reckoned as righteousness.

He did not achieve this state of being through obedience to the Torah/Law (especially the commandment of the law for circumcision). The *Torah* was not yet given, thus, righteousness could not be attained by the law if at the time Abraham was reckoned as righteous there was no law. In fact, Abraham was called "righteous" (Gen 15:6) before he was circumcised (Gen 17:9-14, 23-27). What reckoned him as righteous was his belief of God's promise; and, in the thinking of Paul, what worked for Abraham will work for us also (cf. Rom 4:11-12).

(3) The Abrahamic Promise Was Given and Fulfilled Through Faith (4:16-22)

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring--not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. ¹⁷As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5). He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed--the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. ¹⁸Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Gen. 15:5). ¹⁹Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's

womb was also dead. ²⁰Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, ²¹being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. ²²This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

The key word in these verses is "promise". The promise Abraham believed was God's promise to bring life out of death. When God told Abraham that he would become the father of many nations he was too old to beget children (i.e., his body was dead as to its ability to father an offspring). For God to give Abraham the ability to beget a child was nothing less than the giving of life to that which is dead. Abraham believed that God would do precisely that (cf. Rom 4:17-20). Quoting Bruce Fieler again:

Paul's accomplishment here is masterful: He completely reinterprets the Jewish understanding of the significance of Abraham, not by abandoning the biblical story but by using it to establish the conclusion he has drawn from the particulars of Abraham's life. He discards genealogy, which would appear to be a central focus of Genesis, and replaces it with faith. Biology is no longer important; lineage is passed down through belief, not through blood (Fieler, p 143).

Here we may see a beautiful development of Paul's concept of faith. Abraham had received a promise from God. His response (intellectual and emotional) to this **testimony** was **persuasion**, or the conviction, that God would be true to the promise he had made to Abraham. His consequent actions were in complete consistency with his belief in God's promise (i.e., he **gave himself up/over** to what he had come to believe). Belief in a promise to bring life out of death (i.e., the death of his a Sarah's reproductive abilities) is to believe in something clearly characterized by wonder - but that is precisely what Abraham did. And his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness; i.e., it drew him into fellowship or into a special relationship with God.

***(4) We Too Stand as Righteous Before God by Means of Faith,
Not by Lawkeeping (4:23-25)***

The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, ²⁴but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness--for us who

believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. ²⁵*He was delivered over to death for (Greek *dia* – “with a view to”) our sins and was raised to life for (Greek *dia* – “with a view to”) our justification.*

The rendering "with a view to," here in verse 25, better suits Paul's play on words present in the Greek text. He uses the Greek preposition *dia* with a direct object in the accusative case. In Greek grammar, *dia* used with the accusative case, "expresses the ground or reason for an act, with the idea of 'because of,' 'for the sake of,' 'on account of.'" (W. D. Chamberlain, *An Exegetical Grammar of the Greek NT*, p. 118). Here in this verse Paul plays two of the same constructions over against one another. In effect this verse says that the reason for Christ's death was our transgressions (i.e., man was enslaved to sin) and the reason for his resurrection was our justification (i.e., to make us righteous or “not guilty”) by destroying the power of sin over those who are in Christ.

Here is the point toward which Paul has been driving. This treatise opened with a question that could have, no doubt, been posed by his imaginary opponent. To the Christian Judaizers who insisted that to be a Christian one must first become a Jew, the argument of Abraham must have been formidable. It was to Abraham that the commandment of circumcision was given. For Paul to use Abraham to prove his argument that one did not have to undergo circumcision in order to achieve righteousness in the eyes of God; rather, a responsive belief to the message of God was what reckoned one as righteous. This line of thought would have been devastating to a Jewish apologist.

What reckoned Abraham righteous, according to Paul, was belief not circumcision. Further, it is belief that reckons us as righteous, not circumcision nor any form of lawkeeping. "But the words, 'it was reckoned to him,'" Paul reasons, "were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also" (Rom 4:23-24). Abraham believed in God's promise to bring life out of death, and so do we. "It will be reckoned to us," he continues, "who believe in him that raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was put to death with a view to our transgressions and was raised for (Greek *dia* – “with a view to”) our justification" (Rom 4:24b-25).

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