

Romans 4

In Romans 4 Paul draws support from the Jewish scriptures for his teaching on righteousness by faith, a central theme already briefly outlined in 1:17 with the aid of a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4, and more fully in 3:21-30 where Paul states that the righteousness of God is attested by the law and the prophets. In chapter 4 scriptural confirmation is provided through the figure of Abraham. For Paul's Jewish contemporaries Abraham was the father of the nation, the example par excellence of one justified by his works. Indeed, the patriarch was even presented in some Jewish traditions as having kept the Torah before it was given to Israel. Thus *2 Baruch* states that the unwritten law was known to Abraham, the commandments were kept, and the promise of future life was planted (57:1-2). The *Wisdom of Ben Sira* 44:19-21 is a particularly instructive text in this respect and, in view of the argument developed by Paul (who shares several themes: father Abraham, his pre-eminence, observance of the Law, covenant, flesh, blessing promised to the nations, inheritance of the world), can be cited here in full:

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory. He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful. Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath that the nations would be blessed through his offspring; that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth, and exalt his offspring like the stars, and give them an inheritance from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.

Paul, however, uses a variety of scriptural passages, particularly Genesis 15:6, to argue his controversial case that Abraham's righteousness was based on faith (his trust in God), not on Torah observance: 'Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'. On the basis of this linking together of righteousness and faith through the example of Abraham, Paul develops what is undoubtedly the central thrust of the chapter (even from 3:25): righteousness by faith is equally accessible to Gentiles and Jews.

The paradigmatic character of Abraham's faith is also presented by Paul in Galatians 3, probably as a result of the arguments presented by his Judaizing opponents. Genesis 15:6 is again cited as scriptural proof (3:6), but the argument

is more complicated and includes reflections on Christ's death as atonement. In Romans 4 Paul focuses more clearly and extensively on Abraham in order to demonstrate i) that his right relationship with God was based on his faith, and ii) that he is the father of all believers, Jews and Gentiles alike.

The Introduction of Abraham (4:1)

Having earlier stated that he upholds the law (3:31) and that the righteousness of God is attested in the law and the prophets (3:21), Paul now substantiates his claim through direct and sustained reference to Abraham. 'What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?' The reference to what Abraham 'found' or 'gained' (Greek: *heurēkenai*) in this verse echoes Genesis 18:3, where Abraham asks God whether he has found favour in his sight. Paul's unstated answer, particularly in the light of Genesis 18:3, must be that Abraham found 'favour (grace), not righteousness by works'. 'According to the flesh' in this opening verse also draws on the role of Abraham as Jewish progenitor (with Israel as the 'sons of Abraham'), and yet, as becomes clear later in the chapter (4:13-18), all those who share the patriarch's faith - whether they are Jewish or Gentile - are his children. And so as Abraham's faith is a type or parallel to Christian faith; he is 'our ancestor' to all Christian believers.

Righteousness of Abraham Apart from Works (4:2-8)

The particle 'for' which introduces the first main section (4:2) demonstrates that Paul is about to argue a point that challenges the viewpoint that Abraham was made righteous on the basis of his works. This notion was based mainly on Genesis 26:5 ('because Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws') and finds clear expression in *Jubilees* 23:10: 'Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord, and well-pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life'. Abraham was the model of obedience and righteousness. Paul's response to this is clearly stated: 'If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about' (continuing the theme in 3:27), and then Paul adds the significant words, 'but not before God'. Even if Abraham had some right to boast over others, he could have no such right before God.

Is Paul here targeting self-righteousness, the view that human beings could pile up merit before God and have something to boast about? It seems more likely,

especially in the light of 'the new perspective' on Paul, that what is being targeted is the notion that Jews (here represented by Abraham) had an inherent advantage over other nations because they alone, as the people of God, are in possession of the Torah. Paul however rejects this, on the grounds that Abraham, the great father of Israel, was accepted by God not on the basis of his observance of the Torah, but on the basis of his faith.

Paul then uses one of his favoured citation techniques ('For what does the scripture say?') in order to draw scriptural proof from Genesis 15:6: 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'. The quotation is clearly taken from the Greek (LXX) rather than the Hebrew (HT) text, for the active verb ('he reckoned') is replaced by the passive ('it was reckoned'). Together with Habakkuk 2:4, these are the only texts in the Jewish scriptures that link righteousness language with faith and, as a result, are of decisive importance for Paul's argument. In its original context it emphasizes that Abraham believed God's promise (Gen. 14), a theme taken up in terms of faithfulness in I Maccabees 2:52: 'Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?' If the faithfulness of Abraham was, from a Jewish perspective, regarded as one of his good works, Paul appeals to this same scriptural verse for a completely opposite purpose: rather than being included among his good works or as that which constitutes righteousness, faith - in the sense of receptive reliance on God - is the grounds for Abraham's salvation.

Paul argument from this point onwards focuses on the meaning of the two verbs used in Genesis 15:6: 'he believed' (4:9-21) and 'was reckoned' (4:4-8). The first component is expressed as follows: 'Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness'. The fact that the verb 'to reckon' (*logizomai*) could be used in a business context for book-keeping (cf. I Macc. 2:52) means that the term is used here by analogy in terms of contractual work: when a contractor carries out his duties, he receives his agreed wage. However, when a person carries out no works, but trusts in God, this faith is reckoned as righteousness. In Abraham's case, if there was mention of 'good works' in the context of Genesis 15:6 they would have been rewarded by 'wages'; but he was accepted by God on the grounds of faith alone. In other words, if

someone does not work and only 'believes' in the God who justifies the ungodly, then it must be that person's belief which is 'reckoned as righteousness'. This does not mean that Paul is here criticising a belief in self-achieved merit and reward; it is simply an analogy contrasting what the worker is due and what is given as a favour.

In particular, God is described in Romans 4:5 as 'him who justifies the ungodly'. This serves as a definition of God's grace, while the 'ungodly' are those who cannot claim to be particularly righteous and who, above all, cannot claim to be within the people of God. The statement is, in this respect, in contradiction to some scriptural texts like Exodus 23:7: 'I will not justify the wicked (LXX: the ungodly)'. While according to this and other scriptural traditions (Prov. 17:15; 24:24) God can be relied upon not to acquit those who are guilty, Paul argues that this is precisely what he can do, as long as there is faith.

As frequently occurs in Jewish homiletical patterns, Paul now turns from a Pentateuchal text to one drawn from the Psalms (particularly instructive for Paul's argument in Romans, but not found in Galatians 3). The psalm in question is LXX Ps. 31:1-2 and its use is due to Paul's application of a Jewish exegetical principle known as *gezerah shawah*: that is, the use of the same words in two different, even 'distant', passages indicate that one passage (in this case Gen. 15:6) can be interpreted in the light of another (in this case Ps. 32:12-2). The common word is 'reckon', but the relationship between the two scriptural passages extends beyond their shared word to content: to be reckoned as righteous by God, as stated in Rom. 4:5, is equivalent to the forgiveness of sins (4:7). What is striking in this Psalm verse is that it interprets a right relationship with God, based on faith, in terms of forgiveness of sins (three relevant clauses: 'whose iniquities are forgiven', 'whose sins are covered', 'the Lord will not reckon sin'). The link between righteousness and forgiveness, which thus binds together the two scriptural passages, is made clear from Paul's introduction to the Psalm: 'David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness...'. Furthermore, by naming David he, like Abraham, becomes a witness to righteousness by faith, not Torah observance.

Abraham Justified Apart from Circumcision (4:9-12)

The 'blessedness' mentioned in Romans 4:9 is clearly associated directly with the blessing pronounced in Psalm 32:1-2 ('Blessed are those...'), but it can also allude to the blessing of Abraham and his seed as Paul's questions now make clear. Paul's aim is to show that the blessing will be received by all, Jews and Gentiles, if they have faith. He therefore asks: 'Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised?' He appeals once again to Genesis 15:6 in an attempt to answer this question. He does so by emphasizing that when Abraham expressed his faith, which was reckoned to him as righteousness, he was uncircumcised (the account of his circumcision is not given until two chapters later in Gen. 17). Paul's inference at this point is that the blessing pronounced in Psalm 32 cannot be confined to the circumcised. If, from a Jewish perspective, Abraham was the father of Israel, 'the circumcised', Paul's radical argument is that, if the sequence of the Genesis narratives is taken seriously, he is also as much the father of the uncircumcised but who have faith. The same point is expressed, albeit differently, in Galatians 3:6-9, 15-18, as part of Paul's argument against Gentile converts receiving circumcision (even though Abraham went on to be circumcised). Paul turns it to support his own case by arguing that it is believers who are Abraham's children. If the patriarch could be accepted without having been circumcised, so can Gentiles.

Furthermore, he says, circumcision is a seal of righteousness, not its cause. The Greek word rendered as 'sign' (*sēmeion*) is used in LXX Genesis 17:11: 'It shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you' (see also *Jubilees* 15:26-28: circumcision is the sign that the one who is circumcised 'belongs to the children of the covenant'). Paul also presents circumcision here as a seal, the guarantee or validation of the righteousness of faith that belonged to Abraham before his circumcision. Thus it is not circumcision that gives Abraham a status of righteousness. God, as a result, intended Abraham to have a relationship with two groups, because a) he was justified before he was circumcised, and b) he subsequently received circumcision (father to the Jews who have faith). As a result, and as 4:12 makes clear, 'he was the ancestor of all who believe'. Thus whatever ambiguity belonged to the reference to Abraham as 'our ancestor' at the beginning of this chapter, at this stage of the argument he is the ancestor or father of all who have faith, irrespective of their race or lineage.

Faith and Promise (4:13-25)

Paul now turns explicitly to the issue of the law: 'For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law, but through the righteousness of faith' (4:13). He therefore states that right relationship with God does not depend on Torah observance; he contrasts law and faith with reference to the promise made to Abraham. The promise in question is God's promise that his descendants would be numerous enough to inherit the world. This promise which, like all promises, requires trust dominates Paul's discussion in Romans 4:13-16. Two issues require comment. First, the reference to Abraham and his descendants (literally, 'his seed') which recurs in several of the Genesis passages (12:7; 13:15-16; 15:5, 18; 17:8; 22:17-18) is now applied, through the sequence of Paul's argument to Gentiles as well as Jews. What he does not do here is develop a christological interpretation of 'seed' (Gal. 3:16, 19). Secondly, the reference to the inheritance of the world certainly refers to the fact that Abraham was promised the possession of the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1, 5, 7; 13:14-17; 17:8) and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed (cf. 18:18; 22:17-18). However, in later Jewish tradition this came to be interpreted as a reference to Abraham's inheritance of the whole world, as the text from Ben Sira quoted at the beginning makes explicit: 'Therefore he assured him by an oath... and give them an inheritance from sea to sea, and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth (44:21).

What is important for Paul, of course, is that the connection between human faith and divine promise has nothing to do with the giving of the Law, and it is certainly not dependent upon observing the Law. If those who are 'the adherents of the law' are to claim the inheritance, then faith and promise would have no effect ('faith is null and the promise void'). In other words, if being God's people is based on possession and observance of the law, then faith and promise have no role to play. But faith is crucial, and the promise cannot be void, because it is God's promise.

Having denied that the Law has a role in determining who are the 'heirs of the promise', Paul now anticipates the question: What, then, is the role of the Law? His thought here follows the same logic as in Galatians 3:18-19: he links the Torah with God's wrath rather than with the promise (this stands in antithesis to certain Jewish traditions that saw law as a source of life). The law actually gives a

definition of what it means to sin and, in the light of this, any sin committed by a person must be a conscious sin, thus transforming that sin into a transgression. This is an allusion to a matter with which Paul will deal extensively in Romans 7:7-24. He is not saying that where there is no law there is no sin, but that there are no definable acts of sin since transgressions are infringements of a law. This brings 'wrath' because it identifies and makes concrete the sinfulness against which God reacts. It is an important function of the Law, but it has nothing to do with making people heirs of God's plan. God's salvific plan is not dependent on a person's fulfilment of the law, but on faith. If the promise were based on the law, only those who possess the law could hope to inherit the promise. Whereas the phrase 'the adherents of the law' in 4:16 probably refers to Christ-believing Jews, 'those who share the faith of Abraham' include not only Jews but also Gentiles. Abraham, as a result and in repetition of 4:11-12, is the father of all.

This statement is again confirmed by Scripture, this time by Gen. 17:5 LXX where Abraham's name is explained: 'I have made you the father of many people'. As 3:31 promised, Paul uses the Law itself (Scripture) to show that God has made Abraham the father of the Gentiles as well as Israel. How can this be? The rest of the verse explains: everything depends on God's ability to create life out of death. The God in whom Abraham believed is described with the aid of two attributes: he is the one who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. Belief in a God who gives life is prominent in Jewish theology. The Eighteen Benedictions, for example, declare: 'Blessed are you, O Lord, who gives life to the dead' (cf. Deut. 32:39; I Sam. 2:6). A further possibility, particularly in the light of the verses that follow, is that this epithet is intended as an allusion to the life or 'resurrection' given to the bodies of Abraham and Sarah through the birth of Isaac (note 4:19: 'his own body which was already as good as dead' and the reference to the barrenness of Sarah's womb). From a Christ-centred perspective it can also denote the raising of Jesus; this is implicit in 4:17-19, but it is certainly made explicit in 4:24-25. The fertility of Abraham and Sarah is therefore a kind of resurrection analogous to the resurrection following the death of Christ. Those who believe in Jesus, and thus echo the faith of Abraham, will inherit the promise of life and they will find acceptance as the people of God. It implies that faith in Christ crucified and resurrected is the way to inherit Abraham's promise.

The unexpected creation of life out of nothingness is echoed in the rhetorical phrase that opens Romans 4:18: 'Hoping against hope' (4:18). Since hope in biblical Greek possesses an element of security and certainty (rather than risk), due to the reliability of God and his promises, Abraham's faith meant hoping in God's promise in defiance of human expectations. What follows is a vivid description of the quality of Abraham's faith (4:19-21). Even when he considered their inability at their age to have a child, he maintained his confidence in God's promise that he would become a father of many descendants. Abraham still trusted that God would do as he had promised. Abraham therefore hoped that he would become the father of many nations, as attested by Genesis 17:5, which is then followed by another quotation, this time from Genesis 15:5: 'So numerous shall your descendants be'. Furthermore, because of his strength of faith, Abraham did consider carefully, without self-deceit, his own circumstances; he did not doubt God's promises (allusion to Gen. 17:17). Abraham's unwavering confidence in God led him to give glory to God, the exact reverse of what unbelievers are unable to do (cf. 1:21).

As the argument draws to its conclusion, Paul quotes the second half of Genesis 15:6 one further time, and, as is appropriate at this stage of the argument, the emphasis falls on Abraham's faith. It is at this point in the argument that Paul now applies what he has deduced about faith from the story of Abraham to Christian believers: 'now the words, "it was reckoned to him" were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (4:23-24). Thus promise, faith not works, life from the dead, all these things apply equally to Christ-believers and to Abraham. These words about Abraham are therefore not only recorded to preserve the story about him; his faith and righteousness are also relevant. Belief in God is now characterized as belief 'in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead' (cf. 4:17). The centrality of the resurrection and the use of the title 'Lord' for Jesus can be compared to 10:9: 'because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'

The concluding words of this chapter seem like a confessional hymn or prayer: 'who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification'. It is introduced by the relative pronoun 'who' (cf. Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15),

the couplet is balanced and contains certain theological motifs not readily associated with Paul. It may, for example, be the case that the first half of the statement looks back to Jesus' death as a way of dealing with human sin (as atonement), while the second half looks forward to the life that lies ahead for Christ-believers, in parallel with the unexpected life promised to Abraham when 'he believed God'. What is unusual for Paul is the linking of justification (*dikaiōsis*) with the resurrection, which certainly explains the strong link in this chapter between justification and resurrection although elsewhere it is connected with the cross (3:24-25; 5:9, 18). What is also striking is the similarities between this verse and the description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52:13-53:12 LXX (on 'handed over', see Isa. 53:6 and 12 ('for our sins')). Indeed in Isaiah 53:11 speaks of the servant justifying many: 'he shall ...make many to be accounted righteous; and he shall bear their iniquities'.

Reading List

- Dunn, James D.G., *Romans* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Waco, 1998).
- Haacker, Klaus, *The Theology of Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
- Hays, Richard B., 'Have we found Abraham to be our Forefather according to the Flesh? A Reconsideration of Romans 4:1', *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1985), 76-98.
- Moxnes, Halvor, *Theology in Conflict: Studies in Paul's Understanding of God in Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 1980).
- Sanders, E.P., *Paul, the Law and the Jewish People* (London: SCM, 1983).