



The Epistle to the Romans

Romans 4: Faith's Poster Boy

We have suggested that Paul insists that his teaching about righteousness or justification through faith does not abolish the law, the Torah, but confirms it. In chapter four Paul shows the correlation between Torah and faith by demonstrating that the Torah, rightly read, says exactly what Paul says: Justification comes through faith.

It would be easy to say that for Paul, Abraham is an example of justification through faith, like an illustration for a sermon. But Paul wants to go deeper than this. He wants to insist that Abraham is the embodiment of the life of faith and that faithful people since Abraham can find their identity in him. It is not just that Abraham shows believers who they should be; he shows them who they are.

Romans 4:1-12: Faith "Reckoned" as Righteousness

Paul is perhaps the greatest Christian theologian, but he is not a systematic theologian. His theological claims emerge from two contexts – the pastoral context and the scriptural context.

We have seen that the pastoral context in Romans has to do with the claim that no one – Jew or Gentile – is free from sin and with the claim that everyone – Jew and Gentile alike – can be made righteous through faith in Jesus (or perhaps through the faithfulness of Jesus, received through faith!)

The primary scriptural context for Romans 4 is Genesis 15 and in particular Genesis 15:6. "Abraham had faith in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (Our translation: The Greek *pisteuo* can mean either 'I believe' or 'I have faith', but for Paul the context clearly is about 'faith' as something that includes belief but is more than that.) Now it may be that Paul was convinced that God's righteousness was reckoned, accounted to human beings through faith and was delighted to find in Genesis 15:6 the affirmation of his prior theological conviction. It is equally possible that as he puzzled about the right, or righteous, or just relationship between God and humankind he was delighted to find in Abraham's story the verse that gave him the vocabulary for his conviction: "faith" "reckoned" "righteousness."

It is possible that as our chapter begins Paul is still engaged in dialogue with his imaginary conversation partner (in the "diatribe" style). If so the interlocutor says, essentially: "But what about Abraham, wasn't he justified by works and didn't he have something to boast about?" And Paul answers: "Not before God." It is equally possible that Paul is simply setting up his own

case using his own words: “Let’s look at Abraham who might seem to have reason to boast about his works. Our text shows us that this boasting has nothing to do with God’s righteousness.”

What Paul needs to make his case that all of humankind can be justified apart from the law is the story of someone who is justified apart from the law. And he needs to make that case from within the law, from Torah itself. The only way he can do this is to find in Hebrew scripture the story of someone who lived without the law as Moses handed it down, and the only way to do that is to find someone who lived before Moses, namely Abraham.

Let us look briefly at the three words that are at the heart of Paul’s argument here.

Faith here is primarily a matter of trust (see 4:5) and it is contrasted to works of the law which are primarily a matter of achievement, accomplishment, striving.

Righteousness is not so much uprightness as a right relationship to God; it is not earned but given and the giving lies entirely within the good pleasure of God’s own self.

Reckoning is a word we do not use much today, even in church, but it has to do with accounting, appraising. But in this context reckoning has to do with counting one’s gifts not with earning one’s salary. God is the accounter (the accountant?) but also the giver. It is by God’s choice that humankind enters into a right relationship to God. Humans acknowledge that gift through faith, trust.

Much of the rest of our section deals with what “reckoning” means in the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul quotes “David” in Psalm 32 to reinforce the view that “reckoning” is not a matter of earning anything but of receiving a free gift – here the gift of forgiveness. (In Romans forgiveness is one aspect of righteousness, but not the whole of it, because the right relationship to God always includes God’s forgiveness but also includes joy, peace, obedience, life in the Spirit.)

Two final words about Abraham in this section.

First, conveniently for Paul, Genesis 15 comes before Genesis 17 so that Abraham was justified before he was circumcised. That is he was justified before he took on the requirements of the Torah. Thus his righteousness does not depend on his being law-abiding in that way.

Second, because he is justified apart from circumcision, Abraham becomes the Father not just of Israel but of all who like him have faith. This brings us back to our first reminder that Abraham is not just an illustration of Paul’s claim but the embodiment of that claim. Father Abraham is the Father of all who believe – Jews and Gentiles alike.

Romans 4:13-15: A Note About the Law

Paul reiterates the claim that Abraham serves as a father, and that his true children are his heirs. He further insists that the true children of Abraham are those who have faith not those who obey the law. (Note that the idea of “law” is a little slippery for Paul. Sometimes it’s the

Torah, the whole story and instruction of the Pentateuch; sometimes it is the “rules” that the Torah contains.)

Paul goes on to suggest what he will suggest elsewhere, that the law is actually the occasion for sin. If there were no law, no one would disobey and there would be no need for wrath. But the law itself leads to disobedience and disobedience leads to wrath. It may be that Paul is here reading the story of Genesis 2 and 3 to suggest that until there was the commandment (don’t eat from that tree) there was no temptation to eat from the tree, no disobedience, and no divine wrath). In any case he clearly wants to say that the law is about God’s wrath, but God’s true righteousness is not a matter of wrath but a matter of promise – received through faith.

Romans 4:16-25: The Fullness of Faith

Our passage reminds us that for Paul not even “faith” is the primary mode of righteousness, of right relationship to God. “For this reason it depends on faith in order that the promise might rest on grace.” (4:16) “Grace” is God’s side of the righteous relationship – it is that sheer gift of justice and loving-kindness which is not counted as a salary due but as a mercy granted generously.

Paul reads a lot into his interpretation of Genesis. When Abraham believes that he will be “the father of many nations” he believes also that he will be “the father of many Gentiles.” The Hebrew word *goyim* and the Greek word *ethne* mean both “nations” and “Gentiles” and Paul wants to insist that when Abraham becomes the father of many nations (Gen. 17:5) he is also the father of believing Gentiles. So the fullness of Abraham’s faith is great enough to include all those who have faith in his pattern – Jews and Gentiles alike.

Because Abraham believes that though he is as good as dead he and Sarah will still have children, he believes in the God “who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” In the narrow sense this is just a fancy way of saying that Abraham believes God can give Sarah a son. In a broader sense Abraham believes the whole Christian story, from creation to resurrection. He becomes not only the father of all Christian believers; he becomes the first Christian believer.

(Paul is a little generous to the Abraham of Genesis when he says that “no distrust made him waver,” since there’s a bit of wavering in the Old Testament story. But he does thereby emphasize that for him “faith” is as much a matter of trust as it is a matter of belief.)

Now that Paul has implicitly made Abraham the first Christian believer he is able explicitly to apply Abraham’s story to the stories of the Roman Christians. They too believe in the God who raises people from the dead – especially the God who raised Jesus from the dead (4:24)

Romans 4:25 ends this section but points forward to a great theme of the center of Romans. To be sure human justification comes through faith, but more than that, essential to that is the claim that our right relationship to God comes through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Abraham is the father of the right relationship to God. Jesus Christ is the true fulfillment of what Abraham hoped and believed.

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