An Exposition on Romans 4:13-25: The Example of Abraham

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Abstract

Romans 4 has been variously interpreted throughout Christian history. The tension present between Luther's perspective on Paul's relationship with Mosaic Law and the conclusions drawn by scholars of the New Perspective on Paul demand theologians and lay people alike to reexamine this chapter. Both Romans and the biblical canon need to be analyzed for an accurate understanding of this passage. Romans 4:13-25 offers a greater understanding of the role of faith in justification, identity in Christ, and the nature of salvation. This exposition seeks to reach a conclusion on its interpretation by using Abraham's faith as an example for all, referring to individual salvation and justification by faith in Christ. Moreover, the New Perspective's argument that Romans 4:13-25 is referring solely to maintaining covenant involvement must be rejected.

INTRODUCTION

In his poem "The Inchcape Rock," Robert Southey weaves a tale of warning, irony, and judgment as he details how Sir Ralph the Rover inadvertently causes his own demise. In an effort to harm other sailors, Sir Ralph cuts the warning bell away from the deadly Inchcape Rock. By severing the bell from the rock, Sir Ralph essentially relinquishes his right to be warned of danger and guided to safety. Ironically, his actions cost him his ship, his crew, and ultimately his own life.

In Romans 4:13-25, Paul focuses on the nature of Abraham's faith and its relevance for New Covenant believers. By using Abraham as an example of how Christians should trust God and believe that He will fulfill His promises to them, Paul ties a warning bell to the deadly rock of "justification by works"—a rock that is sure to sink the ship of any Christian. This exposition on Romans 4 will include relevant and appropriate contextual work, an exploration of the influence of the New Perspective on Paul's writings, and an exegesis of verses 13-25.[1]

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The book of Romans, like each epistle in the Pauline corpus, begins with an introduction of Paul as the author. While it is clear that Paul used the services of Tertius as an amanuensis, scholars agree that the detailed and concise nature of Romans suggests that it was composed by dictation.[2] The specific method, whether it was written out longhand directly from Paul's word-for-word dictation or shorthand and later written out is a nonissue, since the final product represents the thoughts and guidance of the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome.[3]

Many scholars suggest that both internal and external evidence point to the Roman church as being predominantly Gentile at the time of Paul's letter.[4] While Paul references both Jews and Gentiles throughout the Book of Romans, he begins his letter by highlighting Gentiles within the Roman church (1:5-6) and later emphasizes his ministry to Gentiles as a whole (15:14-22). The fact that half of the names Paul mentions in the last chapter are Jewish dismisses the idea that Paul is writing to an entirely Gentile church.[5] Historical-political events during this time also support the idea of a large Gentile population within the community of Roman believers. In A.D. 49, Claudius's edict expelled the Jews from Rome, leaving a mostly Gentile church. After Claudius' death in A.D. 54, the edict lapsed, and Jews were welcomed back into the capital. While there is overwhelming evidence, both internally and externally, that the Roman church was Gentile in ethnic composition, some scholars forego mentioning the specific nature of the groups present.[6] Cranfield instead argues that Paul's commitment to the Christian community in Rome was not a matter of ethnicity but rather of geography. This erasure suggests that any church at the center of the Roman Empire, in Gentile territory, is "within the sphere of his responsibility," and, therefore, Paul has a right to address it with authority.[7]

The epistle to the Romans, which F.F. Bruce describes in part as "a sustained and coherent statement of the gospel," was intended for a body of mature believers.[8] This intended audience is shown throughout the letter when Paul mentions their notable faith (1:8) and expresses his desire for mutual edification among them (1:12; cf. 15:24). Paul's consistent reference to the Old Testament and the patriarchs (mostly in chapter 4) make it clear that his audience had a working knowledge of the Old Testament. While Paul was confident that those in the Roman church were "full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another" (15:14), he was also aware that theological disagreements existed between the Jews and Gentiles.[9] Given Paul's recurring emphasis on unity (14:19; 15:5-6; 16:17), it is clear the theological disagreements present between the groups were a serious threat to the harmony that existed within the church. Though Paul had not established the Roman church or even visited Rome at the time of his writing, he felt that it was his responsibility—not only as a minister to the Gentiles (1:5; 15:16) but as a servant of Christ (1:14-15)— to provide instruction and guidance so the believers in Rome may glorify God with "one mind and one voice" (15:6).

LITERARY AND STRUCTURAL CONTEXT

The epistle is generally divided into four main sections: opening greetings (1:1-17), theology (1:18-11:36), paraenesis (12:1-15:13), and final greetings (15:14-16:27). Due to the variety of forms and styles used within the letter, most scholars are cautious not to force it to conform to one specific genre. Instead, Dunn proposes that "the distinctiveness of the letter far outweighs the significance of its conformity with current literary or rhetorical custom."[10]

Though several themes arise throughout Romans (e.g. faith, atonement, and the distinct persons and roles of the Trinity), the overarching theme, to which Schreiner alludes in his outline, is God's righteousness and the outworking thereof.[11] The content of Romans 4 springs from 3:27-28, as Abraham is the paradigm of one who is "justified by faith apart from the works of the law." The structure of Romans 4:13-25 is threefold: the reception of the promise by faith (4:13-16), the characteristics of Abraham's faith (4:17-22), and an application for all Christians (4:23-25).

THE INFLUENCE OF THE NEW PERSPECTIVE[12]

The nature of Paul's relationship with the Law has long been a topic of discussion in the arena of New Testament scholarship. The New Perspective argues that Paul's discussion of "justification by faith" in Romans refers to the maintained covenant relationship with God. In contrast, the Lutheran perspective argues his discussion to be about the initial entrance into the covenant.[13] The perspective chosen undoubtedly affects the interpretation of Romans 4.

Supporters of a New Perspective understanding of Romans 4 largely construct their argument based on three factors: an alternative interpretation of Genesis 15:6 (i.e., since Gen. 15:6 is both preceded and succeeded by covenantal language it must therefore be interpreted in terms of covenant involvement); the rendering of *dikaiosune* present in Romans 4:11 (cf. Gen. 17:10-11) as meaning "covenant membership"; and a study of the *dikaiosune* language present in Psalm 106:30-31 (cf. Numbers 25), which supporters maintain refers to the identification of Jews and Gentiles (i.e., covenant) as opposed to the personal justification of the sinner.[14]

While Wright and Dunn's arguments have their strengths, to accept the New Perspective understanding of Romans 4 in its entirety would be to misunderstand the nature and context of Romans as a whole. Diluting Paul's instruction as being primarily ethno-focused disregards the careful consideration he puts into developing "his own line of thought" and proving his own point.[15] The New Perspective attempts to form a conclusion out of the covenant and promise-oriented language found in Romans 4, instead of recognizing it as pointing to a greater truth: Each human, including Abraham, is justified through faith alone (cf. 3:22-24; 3:28; 4:10).

EXPOSITION

The Reception of the Promise by Faith

v. 13: It was not through the 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.

Verse 4:13ff is intimately connected with 3:27-28. Boasting in a perceived state of righteousness solely based on one's ethnicity or ability to follow the Law is excluded because *all*—Jews and Gentiles alike—have sinned and are unworthy of a life, earthly and eternal, spent with God (cf. 3:22ff).[16] Paul goes on to write in 3:24 that though all are condemned because of their sinful nature, "all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." The focus on Abraham's faith in chapter 4 therefore serves as proof that "the principle of justification by faith apart from works of any kind was in fact the principle operating in the Old Testament."[17]

The original context of the "promise"—*epangelia*—received through faith is in Genesis 15, where God made the promise to Abraham that he would have a son, Isaac, and through him would come an immeasurable progeny (15:4-5). Though there are no Old Testament passages that correspond directly with Paul's statement of Abraham's being "heir of the world," many scholars agree that Paul speaks not of earthly territory but rather of the divine and eternal kingdom that is fulfilled in Christ.[18] In Romans, Paul has a different kind of *epangelia* in mind: The promise to Abraham is not just the guarantee of biological heirs (as it was in Genesis 15) —it is rather "the ultimate restoration...of man's inheritance which was lost through sin" and, therefore, full justification and restoration before God.[19] Abraham, the father of both the circumcised and the uncircumcised (15:11-12), and his spiritual offspring receive "the world" because it is through Christ that "all things" belong to us, including "the world" (1 Cor. 3:21ff).[20]

v. 14-15: For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

These verses continue the argument that Paul makes concerning the nature of faith and its relation to the Law. "Those who depend on the law" are those who "are governed by law as the guiding and determining principle of their religion."[21] If reliance on the Law is what brings salvation, then faith is "of no effect" and has been made void —*kekenotai*[22]. The promise is rendered "entirely idle"—*katergetai*.[23] In other words, if faith "has failed to attain its end," then the promise "fails to take effect" and both are rendered useless in the grand scheme of salvation.[24] Paul contends that while faith brings the promise to fruition, the law brings wrath and judgment. Without faith, there would be no heirs, since Christ alone has fulfilled the Law in its entirety and is, therefore, the only one who has a claim on God on the basis of obedience.[25]

The role of 3:15b (*viz.*, "and where there is no law there is no transgression") is unclear. Many scholars suggest it is a parenthetical statement explaining the nature of wrath mentioned in the preceding catena of verses.[26] Others contend that while it is an important statement, it is not logically connected to the argument at hand.[27] The latter explanation can surely be discarded since the themes in vv. 14-15a are also present in v. 15b. The presence of "*de*" at the beginning of v. 15b signals an explanation of the previous section, namely that Paul is offering clarification on exactly how the law brings wrath.[28] The meaning of the sentence hinges on the Greek word *parabasis*, meaning "transgression." While sin was present before the Mosaic Law, transgression—the violation of a stated law or a given commandment—would not have been possible before the proclamation of the Law.[29] Therefore, since the Law exists, transgression exists. It is the Law that holds people even more accountable to God's will and the consciousness of the infraction that ultimately brings wrath.[30]

v. 16: 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 have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all.

Paul uses the term *dia*—meaning "therefore"—at the beginning of this verse to signal that he is drawing a conclusion from his previous statements. Throughout chapter 4, Paul goes through a list—works, circumcision, obedience to the Law—and in each case affirms "the priority of Abraham's faith," proving that it is only through faith in God that the promise can be secured.[31] Not only is this promise secured by faith for Abraham but also for "all Abraham's offspring"—natural and spiritual, "those of the law" and "those who have the faith of Abraham." This further proves that "circumcision or uncircumcision is irrelevant to a man's status before God" (cf. vv. 11-12).[32] In this way, Abraham is the "father of us all" to those who believe: Jewish and Gentile Christians who come into the promise through faith.

The Characteristics of Abraham's Faith

The following passage has been subdivided different ways. Some scholars choose to treat vv. 17b-22 as a thematic whole;[33] others prefer to exegete each verse individually;[34] while still others employ a different structure entirely.[35] Due to limited space in this exposition, it is necessary to exegete the following verses as concisely yet as accurately as possible, maintaining the fidelity of the existing themes and natural divisions.

Despite the differing subdivisions between scholars, the focus here remains on the nature of Abraham's faith and Paul's desire to prove how he can be the father of both Jews and Gentiles apart from circumcision (4:1).[36] The importance of this proof lies in its relevance to the formation of an accurate understanding of salvation and justification for Paul's original audience as well as all "who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (4:24).

v. 17: As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

By citing Genesis 17:5, the Old Testament passage regarding God's promise of making Abraham the "father of many nations," Paul affirms that his role of father over all nations "was God's intention from the beginning."[37] Abraham is "our father" in the sight of God, the same God whom Abraham believed would fulfill His promise. Paul goes on to describe this God as the One who "gives life to the dead" —referring, in this context, to Sarah's womb and to Abraham's body, which was "as good as dead" (17: 19).[38] God also "calls into being things that were not," alluding to both Isaac and the innumerable descendants who came as the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis 15. In light of verses 24-25, Moo argues that this verse also carries another application: Not only is God the One who "gives life to the dead" generally, but He is also "the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."[39]

This truth ultimately points back to the character of God and His power as Creator. In Romans 1, Paul states that while Gentiles were equipped with a "fundamental knowledge of God the creator, mediated by God's revelation in nature," they still rebelled against Him and turned to idolatry (vv.19-20, 23).[40] Abraham, however, places his trust in God. When "confronted with God the creator—the one who calls into existence that which has no existence," Abraham responds with faith, trust, and acknowledgment.[41] Parallels with Romans 1 are present throughout Romans 4 and will resurface in verse 20.

v. 18: Against 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."

Paul continues his discussion of the characteristics of Abraham's faith as he draws nearer to the conclusion of his overall argument. The word *hope* in verse 18 carries a different meaning each time it is used here. Against all human hope, Abraham placed his hope in God and trusted Him to fulfill His promise. It should also be noted that Abraham's hope was not impassive—it was an expectant hope rooted in "a firm confidence in God as the one who determines to the future according to what he has promised."[42] Through this hope, Abraham's offspring became as innumerable as the stars (Gen. 15:5-6), and he became the "father of many nations" (Gen. 17:5).

At this point, Paul states that Abraham "faced the fact that his body was as good as dead" (v. 19). Abraham recognized his circumstances and took them into account "without attempting to deceive himself"[43] or "weakening in his faith." The interplay between a "weak faith" and "strong faith" is present throughout Romans. Dunn states the implication is that "faith is weak when it allows itself to be determined by or depend upon what lies within human power," which is certainly not the faith of Abraham.[44] On the contrary, Abraham "did not waver through unbelief...but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God" (v. 20).

vv. 19-22: Without 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. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness."

Paul's second and final use of his "dead/gives life" wordplay occurs in verse 19 (cf. v. 17); Abraham's body was "as good as dead" and Sarah's womb "also dead." Jipp makes the point that the Greek word used, *nekrosin*, is not typically used "to describe natural decay of sexual organs or a female's barrenness, but is rather a word reserved for a corpse (see 2 Cor. 4:10)."[45] This diction once again alludes to God's resurrecting power.

Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God" but displayed a strong faith in God's character by giving glory to Him (v. 20). Johnson points out a significant parallel that exists between Abraham's actions here and those of idolaters in Romans 1:21. Idolaters, despite knowing God, "did not glorify him or give him thanks," while Abraham "gave glory to God," recognizing and acknowledging God's presence and power.[46] Abraham was also "fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised," which is why "it was credited to him as righteousness" (v. 22).

An Application for All Christians

vv. 23-25: The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Paul concludes his argument by discussing the relevance of God's promise to his readers. God's promise to Abraham is "not for him alone," but also "for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (vv. 23-24). It is through the fulfillment in Jesus Christ that a believer's faith—the same "dynamic faith as Abraham"—can be "credited to them as righteousness" as well.[47] The initial audience of Romans, and believers today, do not trust God to fulfill the same promise for them as He did for Abraham (e.g. raising to life a "dead" body and womb), but rather they believe in the character of the God who has "raised Jesus from the dead."[48]

The chapter ends with Paul's statement that Jesus "was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." The Greek word for "delivered over"—*paradidomi*—was also used in the Gospels when Jesus was "'handed over' by Judas, the priests and Pilate."[49] In this verse, however, the verb carries a different meaning. The fact the Father "did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32) affirms that "both the death and resurrection of Jesus are attributed to the Father's initiative."[50] It was for our sins that Jesus Christ was handed over to death, and for our salvation—our justification before the Father—that He was raised to life.

CONCLUSION

Paul's letter to the church in Rome serves as a testimony to God's righteousness and as an exhortation for all Christians to live in a right relationship with Him. Romans 4:13-25 challenges believers to look to Abraham's faith as a model for their own. Paul provides his readers a detailed description of how Abraham's belief "was credited to him as righteousness" when he believed God would make him a "father of nations" (Gen. 15:6; 17:5). Paul encourages his audience to anchor themselves in the hope that they too are credited with righteousness when they believe that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead (Rom. 4:24). When believers look to Abraham's faith and choose to trust God, they see His righteousness guiding them to safety, now and forever.

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[1] All Scripture references are in the New International Version unless otherwise stated.

[2] See Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 2; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans, a Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1985), 9.

[3] Schreiner, *Romans*, 2.

[4] F.F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: an Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1963), 17; Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 2; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1968), xxii.

[5] Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 2.

[6] Cranfield, *Romans*, 9.

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[9] John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 34.

[10] James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), lix.

[11] Schreiner, *Romans*, 25.

[12] Heading adapted from Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 14.

[13] Dunn, *Romans*, lxv.

[14] N T Wright, "Paul and the Patriarch: the Role of Abraham in Romans 4," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament (Online)* 35, no. 3 (2013): 218-223, accessed July 18, 2016, EBSCOhost.

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[17] Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 121.

[18] Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 213; Dunn, *Romans*, 213; Cranfield, *Romans*, 90.

[19] Cranfield, *Romans*, 90.

[20] Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 130.

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[22] James Strong, *The New Strong's Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 137.

[23] Strong, *Concordance*, 133.

[24] Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 281.

[25] Cranfield, *Romans*, 91.

[26] See Cranfield, *Romans*, 91; Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 281.

[27] Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 214.

[28] Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 282.

[29] Strong, *Concordance*, 188.

[30] Schreiner, *Romans*, 230; Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 282.

[31] Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 132.

[32] Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans*, 108.

[33] Stott, Kruse.

[34] Dunn, Moo.

[35] Cranfield, Murray, Schreiner, and Mounce.

[36] Joshua W. Jipp, "Rereading the Story of Abraham, Isaac, and 'Us' in Romans 4," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 32, no. 2 (2009): 231, accessed July 18, 2016, EBSCOhost.

[37] Schreiner, *Romans*, 235.

[38] Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 216.

[39] Moo, *Romans 1-8*, 286.

[40] Edward Adams, "Abraham's Faith and Gentile Disobedience: Textual Links between Romans 1 and 4," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 65 (March 1997): 52, accessed July 18, 2016, EBSCOhost.

[41] Adams, "Abraham's Faith and Gentile Disobedience," 52.

[42] Dunn, *Romans*, 219.

[43] Cranfield, *Romans*, 94.

[44] Dunn, *Romans*, 220.

[45] Jipp, "Rereading the Story of Abraham, Isaac, and 'Us' in Romans 4," 235.

[46] Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: a Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad Pub., 1997), 79.

[47] Schreiner, *Romans*, 241.

[48] Johnson, *Reading Romans*, 79.

[49] Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 135.

[50] Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 135.

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