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## SOME ECUMENICAL REFLECTIONS ON ROMANS 4

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Paul's exposition in the fourth chapter of this letter to the Christians in Rome sheds some interesting and important sidelights on the character of his gospel. In particular it tells us something about the internal dynamics in the emergence of Christianity which are still of potential importance for today.

### I. The Jewish character of Christianity

Romans 4 is one of the finest examples of Jewish midrash available to us from this era. It consists of an exposition of Gen. 15.6—ἐπίστευσεν δὲ Ἀβραάμ τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην. The exposition proper (vv. 3–22) is bracketed by explicit citation of the text itself (vv. 3, 22), with several other references or echoes incorporated within the body of the midrash (vv. 5, 6, 9 and 11, 17 and 18), and consists of Paul's explanation of the two key verbs, ἐλογίσθη καὶ ἐπίστευσεν. Typical of the midrash form is the use of Ps. 32.1 to elucidate the text from the Torah (vv. 3, 7–8) and the interweaving of Gen. 17.5 into the exposition (v. 17), to provide the fatherhood of Abraham as the counterpart to the principal theme (vv. 1, 11–12, 16–18).

The following analysis is meant to highlight the chief emphases as the exposition moves forward, not a firm structure imposed by Paul. In fact each 'phase' is interrelated, with thematic words (faith, promise) appearing outside the stage at which they are most prominent, and there is no clear division at v. 17 in particular.

- vv. 1–2 Introduction (in continued diatribe style)
- 3 The text to be explained
- 4–8 The meaning of ἐλογίσθη
- 4–5 from the logic of divine-human relations
- 6–8 from its use in Ps. 32. 1–2 (LXX 31.1–2)
- 9–21 The meaning of ἐπίστευσεν
- 9–12 from the order of events in Abraham's case
- 13–17 from the link between faith and promise in Abraham's case
- 17–21 from the character of Abraham's faith
- 22 Conclusion—the text explained

23–25 Corollary—its wider application as thus understood.

That Paul thinks and writes as a Jew is clear. Indeed so Jewish in character is Rom. 4 that it can plausibly be argued that Paul has reworked an already existing midrash on Gen. 15.6 which originated among non-Christian Jews<sup>1</sup>. The hypothesis as thus expressed seems unnecessarily elaborate and fails to do justice to all the evidence. More likely is the thesis that Rom. 4 is a composition of Paul himself in which he has followed a traditional homiletic pattern and included traditional Jewish themes and emphases<sup>2</sup>.

The Jewish character of the content of the midrash is most clear in vv. 13–22, particularly vv. 17 and 22. In v. 17 consider the description of God as τοῦ ζῶσοποιούντος τοὺς νεκροὺς καὶ καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα. With the first phrase we may compare the language of the second Benediction—you 'make the dead alive' (cf. Ps. 71.20 LXX 70.20; Tob. 13.2; Wisd. 16.13; TGad 4.6). In view of Heb. 11.19, an allusion to Gen. 22.1–14 cannot be ruled out<sup>3</sup>. But Paul also has more immediately in view the deadness of Abraham's body and of Sarah's womb (v. 19), and so presumably also the broader use of ζῶσοποιεῖν where it can denote God's creative, sustaining (keeping alive) or renewing power (cf. Neh. 9.6; Job. 36.6; Ec. 7.12; Jos & As. 8.9).

Both elements of the second participial phrase are also firmly rooted in Jewish thought. Well established is the idea of God's act of creation as an effectual 'calling' (Isa. 41.4; 48.13; Wisd. 11.25; Philo *Spec. Leg.* 4.187; 2 Bar. 21.4; Jos & As. 8.9). And the belief that God created *ex nihilo* is a particular feature of Philo's theology, for whom God is τὸ ὄν who brings non-being into being (*Opif.* 81; *Leg. All.* 3.10:

1. H.J. van der Minde, *Schrift und Tradition bei Paulus* (München: Schöningh, 1976) 78–83, developing a suggestion by O. Michel, *Römerbrief* (Vandenhoeck: Göttingen<sup>3</sup>, 1978) 160—the pre-Christian midrash comprising vv. 3, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17a and 18c.

2. H. Moxnes, *Theology in Conflict: Studies in Paul's Understanding of God in Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 1980) 195–205.

3. C.K. Barrett, *Romans* (London: Black, 1957) 96–7.

*Migr.* 183; *Heres* 36; *Mut.* 46; *Mos.* 2.100; and note especially *Spec. Leg.* 4.187– τὰ μὴ ὄντα ἐκάλεσεν εἰς τὸ εἶναι; cf. also 2 Macc. 7. 28; 2 Bar. 21.4; 48.8). As with the preceding phrase, Paul is obviously drawing on language which was firmly established in Jewish theological reflection, particularly in Hellenistic Jewish circles. Noteworthy is the parallel to the complete formulation in Joseph and Asenath 8.9–θεός, ὁ ζωοποιήσας τὰ πάντα καὶ καλέσας... ἀπὸ τοῦ θανάτου εἰς τὴν ζωὴν<sup>4</sup>.

Similarly in v. 22 Paul's description of God as δυνάτοῦ καὶ ποιῆσαι draws on an already well developed theme of Jewish theology – with, once again, Philo's confidence in God's power to do all things providing the nearest parallels (*Som.* 2. 136; *Jos.* 24*b*; *Spec. Leg.* 1.282), and not least with reference to the same episode in Genesis 18.14–15 (*Abr.* 112; note also 175; *Qu. Gen.* 3.2, 56)<sup>5</sup>.

The extent to which in this crucial apologetic chapter Paul argues as a Jew using central Jewish theologoumena should serve as a reminder that Christianity is the offspring of first century Judaism and its antecedents. Christianity is a Jewish faith and cannot be understood without reference to this Jewish character so integral to it and to its self-understanding. Within all our Christian concerns for a growing together of the different Christian traditions, we should not lose sight of the larger ecumenical concern which Paul himself felt so deeply (Rom. 9–11). The Jewish heritage and character which is Christianity's is not something which belongs merely to its unformed and underdeveloped beginnings. May it not be that one way towards renewal of Christian theology and faith is to recover our sense of the Jewishness of Christianity? If the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, and the people of God will remain incomplete without our Jewish brethren<sup>6</sup>, then we may hope that by rediscovering the Jewishness of our common faith, by taking seriously not least the dual character of our Old Testament (Jewish and Christian scriptures), we may find that the ecumenical process has been advanced further than we could have imagined or dared to hope.

## II. Diverse views within Christianity

I have so far stressed the continuity evident in Romans 4 between early Judaism and emerging Christianity. In fairness we must also note the element of discontinuity also evident in Romans 4 between the Christianity of Paul and the Judaism from which he himself emerged. For in turning to Abraham as a test case for his understanding of the gospel and in focusing on Gen. 15.6 Paul was knowingly and deliberately confronting head-on a deeply held set of Jewish convictions about Abraham.

4. See further Moxnes 241–7.

5. See further Moxnes 146–55.

6. Cf. particularly M. Barth, *The people of God* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983).

At the time of Paul Abraham was regularly represented as a type of or model for the pious Jew. Already it was being said that he had observed the law, in its as yet unwritten state (Jub. 16.28; 24.11; 2 Bar. 57.1–2; m. Kidd. 4.14; Abraham 'was accounted a friend of God because he kept the commandments of God'—CD 3.2). More frequently recalled was the folk memory of how Abraham had been tested and yet found faithful, with particular reference to the sacrifice of Isaac (Jub. 18.26; Jub. 18.16; 19.8; m. Abot. 5.3). Here particularly noteworthy is Sir. 44.19–21:

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations  
and no one else has been found like him in glory;  
he kept the law of the Most High,  
and was taken into covenant with him;  
he established the covenant in his flesh,  
and when he was tested he was found faithful.  
Therefore the Lord assured him by an oath  
that the nations would be blessed through his posterity;  
that he would multiply him like the dust of the earth,  
and exalt his posterity like the stars,  
and cause them to inherit from sea to sea  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Paul could well have had this passage in mind, since it associates so many of the same themes (father Abraham, his pre-eminence, lawkeeping, covenant, flesh, blessing promised to the nations, posterity, even the use of εὐρίσκειν). What catches immediate attention, however is the marked divergence between ben Sira's handling of these themes and Paul's. For ben Sira the covenant promise of blessing to the nations is a consequence of Abraham's faithfulness and presupposes Israel's supremacy. Paul reads the same scriptural tradition differently at both points (see 4.4–12). Even if Paul did not have this passage in mind as such, he certainly had in view the train of thought expressed by ben Sira.

More striking still is the fact that another expression of the same motif uses just the phrase as we find in Sir. 44.20, ἐν πειρασμῷ εὐρέθη πιστός, and immediately adds καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην, 'when he was tested he was found faithful, and it was reckoned to him for righteousness' (1 Macc. 2.52)—the same appeal to Gen. 15.6 which Paul himself makes in v.3. Clearly then Paul has in view another well established theme of Jewish theology at that time, which tied the covenant promise made to Abraham, to Abraham's faithfulness under testing, and which regarded Abraham's offering of Isaac as the key to understanding Gen. 15.6.

Paul, of course, goes on to dispute this alternative current exposition of Gen. 15.6. But that should not cause us to qualify our first reflection too much. For at this stage what we have is still an in-house debate – not yet Christianity disputing with Judaism, but Jews disagreeing on the way best to understand their common heritage of scripture and tradition.

More to the point, not only Jews disagreeing among

themselves, but also Christians disagreeing on the same issue. For when we talk of Jewish exposition of Gen. 15.6 we should not forget that one of the strongest witnesses to the Jewish interpretation of Gen. 15.6 is the *Christian* text, James 2.18–24. The fact that Jas. 2 deals with the same topic as Rom. 4 from a different angle is, of course, well known. What has been insufficiently appreciated, however, is the extent to which Jas. 2 actually sets itself to dispute the line of argument leading into and through Rom. 4. The correlation can be tabulated quite straightforwardly:

	Romans	James
Issue posed in terms of faith and works	3.27–28	2.18
Significance of claiming ‘God is one’	3.29–30	2.19
Appeal to Abraham as test case	4.1–2	2.20–22
Citation of proof text—Gen. 15.6	4.3	2.20–22
Interpretation of Gen. 15.6	4.4–21	2.23
Conclusion	4.22	2.24

The point is, that at each step the two lines of reasoning are antithetical. Where Paul sets out to demonstrate that a man is justified *πίστει χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου*, James sets out to *challenge* the claim that a man can show his *πίστιν χωρὶς τῶν ἔργων*. Where Paul argues from the Jewish credal confession that ‘God is one’ to support his contention that God justifies *all* men in the same way (by faith), James dismisses the appeal to the same credal confession—‘Even the demons believe—and shudder!’ Where Paul denies that ‘Abraham our forefather ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη’, James affirms precisely the opposite, that ‘Abraham our father ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη’. Most striking of all is the fact that James’ interpretation of Gen. 15.6 is precisely in line with the current Jewish exposition outlined above and expressed most clearly in Sir. 44.20 and 1 Macc. 2.53 (Gen. 15.6 understood by reference to Abraham’s offering of Isaac)—the very interpretation of Gen. 15.6 which Paul set out to refute. In other words, James appears to be responding to the (in Jewish terms) idiosyncratic exposition of Paul by appealing to the standard Jewish understanding of the text. Consequently it is not surprising that the two conclusions seem to be moving in different directions, with James’ finding that a man is justified ἐξ ἔργων and *not* ἐκ πίστεως μόνον running directly counter to Paul’s finding that justification comes through faith as bare and unconditional trust in the covenant promise of God.

The tension involved here between Paul and James should not be exaggerated. But neither should it be ignored or played down. It stands as a reminder that Christianity is not a wholly uniform faith even on some central emphases. If the continuity between Judaism and Christianity is fundamental to Christianity, the precise extent and character of that continuity is one of the points on which apostolic Christianity disagreed. And that disagreement has been preserved in our cano-

nical documents to remind us Christians of later generations that diversity of viewpoint and emphasis is part of Christianity, as important indeed as its unity, and, in fact, integral to its unity, since (in the imagery of beloved Paul) without such diversity the body of Christ cannot be one (1 Cor. 12).

### III. A Reformation Misunderstanding

The third reflection arises out of the reassessment of Paul’s teaching on justification by faith and not by works which has been prompted particularly by the contribution of E.P. Sanders<sup>7</sup>. Sanders has shown clearly that the Judaism of Paul’s day, as documented by its own writings, hardly corresponds to the picture so frequently drawn in Protestant exegesis of a narrow legalism which thought it could earn salvation by the merit of good works. Jewish self-understanding began with grace—the grace of God’s free election and choice of Israel. The law was God’s gift to his covenant people, to show them how to live within the covenant. Central within the law the provision of atonement and forgiveness, and the emphasis on the need for repentance was characteristic of Judaism then as now. The typical Jewish attitude, we may say, was very like that of James—covenant membership demonstrated by faithfulness, faith demonstrated by works. In short, works of law not as a way of earning salvation, of gaining God’s favour, but as the way of life of those who already enjoy God’s favour and who as God’s people can look to him for continued salvation.

Romans 4 enters the discussion not simply because it holds a central place in Paul’s exposition of his own thought, but more particularly because of v. 4. For if any verse seems to support the classic Protestant presentation of the Judaism opposed by Paul as a religion concerned to earn God’s favour, it is Rom. 4.4—‘To him who works, reward is not reckoned κατὰ χάριν but κατὰ ὀφείλημα’. The language of works, reward and debt is explicit. Does it not follow then that this verse represents the current teaching within Judaism which Paul rejects? Is the implication not justified that the Pharisaic Judaism from which Paul himself had emerged taught salvation by works, reward according to merit, the possibility of a man putting God in his debt?

This deduction, however, mistakes the force of v. 4 because it fails to grasp the line of argument Paul develops here. At this point Paul is beginning the first stage of his exposition of one of the key words in Gen. 15.6—ἐλογίσθη. He starts from the well known fact that λογίζεσθαι was a technical term in commercial dealings (‘reckon or put to someone’s account’)<sup>8</sup>. This obviously suggested that one way of understanding ἐλογίσθη was in terms of the categories of the business

7. E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

8. BAGD λογίζομαι; TDNT 4. 284.

world. In terms of the contractual relationships of commerce λογίζεσθαι must mean a reckoning of payment for work done. No business could survive which simply gave away its stock or paid its employees for not working. Hence κατὰ χάριν in a sense which would be sufficiently familiar in the business world—'as a favour, out of good will'<sup>9</sup>. Likewise ὀφείλημα, which again is drawn from the business world analogy and which consequently occurs only here in Paul. In short, Paul's language shows where he derives the possible sense of λογίζεσθαι from. There is an obvious reason for posing this alternative sense of λογίζεσθαι and it is given by the normal business associations of the term itself.

The movement of Paul's thought is also clear. He takes as his starting point the fact that in Gen. 15.6. ἐλογίσθη is accompanied not by ἐργάζεσθαι but by πιστεύειν. Had it used ἐργάζεσθαι then the business sense of ἐλογίσθη would have been appropriate. But since Gen. 15.6 uses πιστεύειν instead, the implication is that in divine-human relations the parallel of a contractual relationship between those who (relatively speaking) are equals is inappropriate. Paul's Jewish interlocutor would not be convinced at this initial attempt to separate Gen. 15.6 from Abraham's faithfulness, but at least so far as the λογίζεσθαι in Gen. 15.6 is concerned the point has weight: in Gen. 15.6 it is *faith* which is so 'reckoned'<sup>10</sup>.

There is no reason in the text of Romans therefore to support the suggestion that Paul is castigating the Judaism of his day for holding to a theology of merit and reward. The wording is used simply as part of the analogy drawn from the world of contract and employment. He does *not* say, If you think of Abraham's faith as a work, you must think of his righteousness as a reward. The contrast is solely between working and believing, between what the worker is due and what is given as a complete favour. The Jew of Paul's day did, of course, have a concept of divine recompense and reward for covenant loyalty (as in Ps. 18.20–24), though we should beware of assuming that the later rabbinic doctrine of merits, first clearly evident in 4 Ezra 8.33, was already characteristic of Pharisaic Judaism<sup>11</sup>. But it is not the concept of reward as such which Paul disputes. He himself has already described God's judgment as a rendering to every man according to his works (2.6,10), and he had not hesitated to

use the word 'reward' in a similar context in his own teaching in an earlier letter (1 Cor. 3.8, 14). His point is simply that in the case of Gen. 15.6 the whole language of 'payment due' is inappropriate. Or rather, that is what he is going to demonstrate. Here he simply poses the alternatives,

work → reckon → debt  
faith → reckon → favour,

as a way of setting up the exposition which is about to follow and as a way of shaking his Jewish interlocutor out of a too ready equation of Abraham's believing with his covenant loyalty. Where (Abraham's) faith is in view the righteousness is surely reckoned in terms of grace not of payment due.

Romans 4.4–5 therefore does not provide evidence that the Judaism confronted by Paul thought that salvation could be earned by putting God in man's debt through the merit of good works. The reassessment of Paul's teaching on justification by faith called for by Sanders should not be refused on the grounds of Rom. 4.4. Consequently also the traditional Lutheran use of justification by faith needs some rethinking, as also the debates within Christianity on the same subject. Not least of importance, the traditionally negative Christian attitude towards Judaism which the Reformation exegesis of Rom. 4.4. reinforced needs to be critically scrutinized in the light of such exegetical reassessments, and Jewish-Christian relations rescued from the centuries of misunderstanding and misrepresentation (on both sides).

It is a testimony to the crucial importance of Paul in shaping Christian thinking both in the past and up into the present, that a passage like Romans 4 can yield such significant checkpoints and signposts along the 20th century ecumenical road – not least because they remind us that in the ecumenical talks not just a meeting across old boundaries is called for but a crossing of boundaries and a redrawing even of long established boundaries. It is an honour and a pleasure to offer such reflections to one who has himself crossed the ecumenical boundaries both academically and geographically.

9. LSJ χάρις; BAGD χάρις.

10. That Paul is not indulging in special pleading here by rewording Gen. 15.6 with πίστις as the subject (4.5) is confirmed from Philo's similar rewording of the same passage in *Herz* 94– λογισθῆναι τὴν πίστιν εἰς δικαιοσύνην αὐτῷ.

11. For rabbinic Judaism itself see Sanders 117–47.