

Romans 4:1-25: The Justice of Abraham

“The way Paul relies on this binary of Judean and gentile makes clear that he is thinking precisely as a Judean, but as one whose mission is directed toward non-Judeans (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 71).”

Paul shifts his argument to an explanation about how Abraham, who was before the law and thus outside of it, is made just by God. This supports his thesis that those outside of the law are made just through faithfulness.

“Abraham is both the ‘father’ (or ancestor) of the Judeans and one who is antecedent to the distinction between the circumcised and the uncircumcised (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 71).”

Remember that Paul’s theology is circumstantial in nature. He is writing to distinct communities and situations, and is not attempting to create a system of believing.

“Rather than suppose that Paul has a ready-made system that is deployed in different circumstances, it may be more accurate or helpful to think about his letters as improvisations that uncover implications or potentialities in the messianic message that had been previously unnoticed or clumsily expressed (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 72).”

Romans 4:2-3

“For if Abraham was made or become just by means works [of law], he has something to boast about, but not to point to as a claim on God. 3 For what does the written [scripture] say? ‘Abraham relied on God and it was counted as justice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 72).”

“To get a sense of what is happening here, I have used ‘relied on’ instead of either ‘believed’ or ‘was faithful to.’ I do this in order to point to a mutual ‘crediting’ that seems to be at work here. Abraham credits the divine promise, and God credits Abraham as being or becoming just. In both cases, we have a way of conjoining future with present, as suggested by the economic term ‘credit.’ To say that Abraham credits the divine promise is to say that he regards it as entailing a future accomplishment.... Abraham anticipates the faithfulness of God with respect to the divine promise. God anticipates the faithfulness of Abraham as leading to or as containing, in principle, justice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 73).”

Romans 4:9-12

“Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, “Faith [faithfulness] was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness [justice].” 10 How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness [justice of his faithfulness] that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe [who are faithful] without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness [justice] reckoned to them, 12 and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faithfulness that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.”

Notice where I have opened up the definitions to include the flow of Paul's argument. Abraham was made just through his faithfulness to what God was doing before he was circumcised.

“Thus, Abraham, who first seem to be the patriarch of the Judeans, is now the father of all the non-Judeans, the gentiles or pagans— that is, of those nations outside the law whose faithfulness is [counted as or credited towards] their justice (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 75).”

“We should note that, for Paul, circumcision in the case of Abraham is not a substitute for faithfulness or a work that merits being found to be just; it is a sign or seal that follows the beginning of faithfulness that it signifies. In Christian terms we would say that baptism is not a cultic act that makes one right with God but is a sign of a pre-existing, if imperfect, faithfulness (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 75).”

Romans 4:16-17

“For this reason it depends on faith [faithfulness], in order that the promise may rest on grace [generosity] and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith [faithfulness] of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, 17 as it is written, “I have made you the father of many nations”)—in the presence of the God in whom he believed [in whom he was faithful], who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”

Paul grounds his understanding of justice in the promise of God. The promise of God “rests on generosity” and is not bound up in anything we accomplish as humans. The promise of God can be trusted beyond anything the law can shape in our life together in community.

Romans 4:20-22

“No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith [faithfulness] as he gave glory to God, 21 being fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised. Therefore his faith [faithfulness] “was reckoned to him as righteousness [justice].”

“We may note here that injustice may come to be ‘justified’ through supposing that justice is ‘impossible.’ It is the [imminent] incapacity for justice rather than the promised of justice that ‘counts’ or is connected. Is this accounting that makes it easy to excuse injustice or to acquiescence in injustice. Nobody is perfect, we say. Don't underestimate original sin, the Christian realist says. And this produces a politics of accommodation— to injustice. On the other hand, entrusting oneself to the promise of that which is we're seems to be impossible [justice, for example] is what produces a becoming just (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 79).”

Paul does not let us escape with our excuses that his argument will never work.

“It has identified a point ‘before’ the law for the discussion of justice, thereby pointing to the possibility of justice outside or apart from the law. It is tied together themes of faithfulness, prominence, generosity and set them in opposition to works, law, and wrath (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 80).”

Romans 4:25

“The final verse of ch. 4 is a confession about the nature of Jesus’ work on believer’s behalf: The one who was given up because of our transgressions and raised because of our justification... Because of the precisely parallel nature of these two clauses and some phraseology unusual for the Pauline corpus, many scholars see this as an early confession or hymn, likely pre-Pauline (Kirk, *Unlocking Romans*, 76).”

“A second consideration, one that becomes all the more important if Paul is quoting a traditional formula of the church, is that Jesus’ resurrection was often looked to as God’s vindication of Jesus (Kirk, *Unlocking Romans*, 78).”

“Our study of Jewish resurrection expectation has shown that ‘vindication of the righteous’ is one key hope entailed in resurrection (Kirk, *Unlocking Romans*, 78).”

Daniel 12:1-4

“At that time Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. 2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth **shall awake**, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. 3 Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. 4 But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end. Many shall be running back and forth, and evil shall increase.”

2 Maccabees 7:20-23

The mother was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord. 21 She encouraged each of them in the language of their ancestors. Filled with a noble spirit, she reinforced her woman’s reasoning with a man’s courage, and said to them, 22 “I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. 23 Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, **will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of his laws.**”

“The resurrection functions as the judicial verdict of ‘righteous’ upon Jesus for twofold reason that Jesus was just in obeying to the point of death (5:18; cf. Phil. 2:6-9) and that Jesus’ death for the transgressions of sinners actually made them righteous. The crucifixion is the righteous and righteous-making deed, and the resurrection is the attestation of the heavenly court that Jesus, and those in him, are righteous. In the words of Lesslie Newbigin, ‘The resurrection is not the reversal of a defeat but the manifestation of a victory’ (Kirk, *Unlocking Romans*, 78).”

“Romans 4 serves as a lengthy explication of how Paul can turn the *Shema* into a claim for the universal scope of God’s justifying action (Kirk, *Unlocking Romans*, 80).”