"HAVE WE FOUND ABRAHAM TO BE OUR FOREFATHER ACCORDING TO THE FLESH?"
A RECONSIDERATION OF ROM 4:1

by

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How does the figure of Abraham in Romans 4 function in Paul’s exposition of the gospel? While this question has drawn the insistent attention of NT exegetes,¹ many studies in the past tended to treat Romans 4 as an isolated unit of material. Two recent dissertations by S. K. Stowers and C. T. Rhyne have moved the discussion forward significantly by demonstrating that formal considerations require this chapter to be read in a larger context;² however, even in these treatments, major obscurities remain concerning the meaning and function of Rom 4:1. This essay seeks to clarify the discussion of Romans 4 by re-examining this verse which introduces Abraham into Paul’s argument and offering a new proposal for translating the Greek text. This proposal, if viable, will cast new light on the way in which Paul employs the figure of Abraham in his discussion, and it will consequently make the continuity of the argument in Romans 3 and 4 more readily discernible. Let us consider the evidence.


A. Rom 4:1: “Our forefather according to the flesh”?

Much of the difficulty of determining the relation of Romans 4 to the larger context of Paul’s argument is a result of the notorious unclarity of the sentence (Rom 4:1) which introduces Abraham into Paul’s discussion. The textual problems in this verse are no doubt a reflection as well as a cause of the interpretive problem. Against the RSV, which chooses to follow Codex Vaticanus in dropping the infinitive εὑρίσκεναι out of the text, there is a solid consensus among recent commentators that the manuscript evidence clearly favors the following reading:

Τι οὖν ἐρῶμεν εὑρίσκεναι Ἅβραχμ τὸν προπάτορά ἡμῶν κατὰ σάρκα;

The rather peculiar εὑρίσκεναι is then usually explained, following the suggestion of Otto Michel, as an echo of the LXX expression εὑρίσκειν χάριν (e.g., Gen 18:3), and the sentence is interpreted to mean, “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, found?” The difficulties with this rendering are at least fourfold: a) the allusion to Gen 18:3 is opaque and awkward, because nothing in the foregoing discussion prepares the reader for it; b) in fact, the expression εὑρίσκειν χάριν occurs nowhere in the Pauline Corpus; c) it seems unlikely that Paul would choose to designate Abraham as “our forefather according to

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4 Thus yielding the meaning, “What shall we say (about) Abraham our forefather according to the flesh?” This reading was accepted by W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (ICC; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 98-99; K. Barth, The Epistle to the Romans (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 117; C. H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (MNTC; New York: Harper & Bros., 1932), 65. However, as Cranfield (Romans, 1.226) remarks, this is “certainly very odd Greek.”

5 In addition to Metzger (Textual Commentary, 509), see also C. K. Barrett, The Epistle to the Romans (HNTC; New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 85 n. 1; E. Käsemann, Commentary on Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 106; Cranfield, Romans, 1.226-27; U. Wilckens, Der Brief an die Römer (EKK VI/1; Zürich: Benziger Verlag, 1978 and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1978) 1.260-61.

6 Paulus und seine Bibel (BFCT 2/18; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1929), 57.

7 The only NT occurrences of the expression are found in Luke 1:30 Acts 7:46, and Heb 4:16. Εὑρίσκειν Ἡλεος does occur in 2 Tim. 1:18.