

The New Perspective on Abraham?

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Abstract

Paul is not the only one in need of re-analysis, according to some scholars. Abraham, in their view, was not just the first Jew but also the first Gentile, and his role in Romans 4 has more to do with being a Gentile than it does with his being the father of the Jewish people. Gerhard Visscher examines whether this reasoning holds up in the writings of Paul and his contemporaries.

While reference to “the New Perspective on Paul” has been commonplace for some time, even to the point that now the term “*beyond* the new perspective” is used,¹ one effect that often goes unnoticed is that the role of Abraham has also undergone re-evaluation. A new perspective is also being proposed with respect to Abraham, the father of all believers. If the question in the New Perspective on Paul concerns questions of works-righteousness and ethnicity, the same questions arise about this patriarch of all believers. Does Paul draw on Abraham in Romans 4 because Abraham is an outstanding example of justification by faith through grace alone, or because he considers Abraham to be the first Gentile who turns to God?²

¹ Notice, e.g., the subtitle of the book by Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

² This article is an expansion and reworking of points raised in Gerhard H. Visscher, *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul: Faith Embraces the Promise*, SBL 122 (New York: Lang, 2009).

Most will agree that a thorough answer to the question also involves an examination of how Abraham was viewed by Paul's contemporaries. It is in fact precisely on this understanding of how literature on the intertestamental period understands Paul that the discussion turns. Bruce W. Longenecker, a scholar who takes an exegetical approach that is very much like that of the leaders of the New Perspective on Paul (James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright), is at one point in his book dialoguing with Stephen Westerholm, a leading critic of the New Perspective on Paul. Regarding Westerholm's insistence that "Rom. 4:1–5 is 'positively fatal' for any reading which considers Paul's critique in 3:21–31 to operate on the level of an attack on Jewish ethnocentrism,"³ Longenecker says, "Westerholm's criticism suffers in that it does not grapple with the manner in which the figure of Abraham functioned in Early Judaism; in Jewish self-definition, and in Jewish attempts to preserve their distinctive way of life, Abraham played an essential role."⁴ The point is significant enough to warrant reviewing all the evidence that Longenecker presents.

First, Longenecker suggests, much as James Dunn has, that in times when Abraham or his descendants were undergoing religious persecution (e.g., the Maccabean period), it was through maintaining their ethnic distinctiveness that Abraham's descendants displayed their faithfulness to God.

Second, Abraham showed himself to be the ideal Jew by entirely obeying the Mosaic law *even before* it was revealed, a fact, says Longenecker, "which itself calls into question Westerholm's claim that Abraham's works 'were certainly not observances of the peculiarly Jewish parts of the Mosaic code.'"⁵ *Jubilees*, in particular, says Longenecker, develops the theme that Abraham observes "all the Mosaic prescriptions for ethnic distinctiveness."⁶ Thus, Longenecker takes the position that "by 'works' Paul is thinking in 4.1–5 specifically of ethnic practices which distinguish Jews from gentiles."⁷

Longenecker does not deny that the charge of "works-righteousness" may play a role in 4:1–5, but he suggests that

if Paul is charging Jews with the attempt to *earn* their salvation by works in a legalistic sense, even this plays a part within his case against Jewish ethnocentrism. ... They think that they are *reacting* to God's grace by their ethnic practices, but, as

³ Bruce W. Longenecker, *Eschatology and the Covenant: A Comparison of 4 Ezra and Romans 1–11*, JSNTSup 57 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 211.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 211–12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Paul insists, the proper response is faith. By rejecting this requirement of covenant relationship, ethnocentric Jews are seen to be *acting* by their own efforts (their ethnic ‘works of law’) in order to gain God’s grace.⁸

What needs to be noted here is the rather narrow position that Longenecker has taken. If there is “works-righteousness” (“legalism,” as he calls it), it has only to do with legalism in the context of ethnocentrism, i.e., a boasting in “works” that are boundary markers.⁹ An analysis of Longenecker’s view, then, would need to determine whether, in the wider context of Paul’s world, Abraham’s righteousness (or faithfulness/obedience) was generally linked with his observance of practices that distinguish Jews from Gentiles.

A related question is this: What did Paul mean when he referred to God as one who “justifies the ungodly” (*ton asebeē*) in Romans 4:5? When it is noted that 4:5 clarifies 4:3, it is evident that Paul had Abraham in mind here first of all and is thus actually referring to the patriarch as “Abraham, the ungodly”! In what sense?

New Perspective scholars are quick to propose a view here that differs from the traditional understanding, suggesting that the word “ungodly” is a reference to Abram’s Gentile state, in which he lived prior to his circumcision. Dunn, for example, writes,

Paul puts together two concepts which in Jewish thought were mutually exclusive: God justifies ... the ungodly (the one who is outside the covenant, that is, outside the sphere of God’s saving righteousness). ... Since the covenant began with Abraham, Abraham was already seen as the type of the proselyte, the Gentile who turns away from his idolatry to the one true God.¹⁰

Similarly, after suggesting that there is nothing in Genesis 12–15 to prepare us for the description of Abraham as ungodly, Wright says:

Paul is presumably thinking of Abraham’s whole history, from his background in pagan Ur through to YHWH’s call and the establishing of the covenant. Jewish tradition knew of Abraham’s background in idolatry and tended to regard him as the first one to protest against this and to worship the one true God instead. Paul does not entirely dissent from this tradition. As he will show in the rest of the chapter, Abraham is thus the forefather quite specifically of Gentiles who come to faith, not merely of Jews. This is, in fact, the beginning of a daring theme: that Abraham is actually *more like* believing Gentiles than he is like believing Jews.¹¹

⁸ Ibid., 213.

⁹ On whether this tenet of the New Perspective holds up, see my *Romans 4 and the New Perspective on Paul*.

¹⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988), 205.

¹¹ N. T. Wright, *Romans*, NIB 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 492.

Similarly, also later, Wright clearly shows that he understands “ungodly” in this manner when he writes: “the God who justifies the ‘ungodly,’ i.e., the Gentile idolaters, the outsiders.”¹²

The question this essay is dealing with then is whether the literature of Paul’s day and Paul’s writing themselves support the viewpoint that Abraham is referenced as “righteous” only with a view to those practices that distinguish Jew from Gentile and whether it is the Jew/Gentile divide that explains Paul’s reference to Abraham as “ungodly.”

I. Abraham: “Righteous,” But in What Sense?

Jubilees,¹³ a book from which Longenecker seeks support,¹⁴ mentions in 23:10 that whereas the lifespan of others was shortened because of sin, this was not the case with Abraham, for “Abraham was perfect in all of his actions with the LORD and was pleasing through righteousness all of the days of his life.” In *Jubilees* 12, Abraham is pictured as one who opposes his family on account of their idolatry. In 16:20–31, Abraham is described as celebrating the Feast of Booths flawlessly even long before this Mosaic feast was ordained. In *Jubilees* 18, the events of Genesis 22 are recounted, but only after the author has recounted all the other tests that Abraham had faced and said, “And in everything in which he (God) tested him (Abraham), he was found faithful. And his soul was not impatient. And he was not slow to act because he was faithful and a lover of the Lord” (17:18).

Even the death of Sarah is not too difficult a test for Abraham; *Jubilees* 19 says of Abraham, “He was found faithful, controlled of spirit. ... He was recorded as a friend of the Lord in the heavenly tablets” (19:9). In *Jubilees* 24:11, as the author reflects on Genesis 26:5, Isaac is told, “And all the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your seed because your father obeyed me and observed my restrictions and my commandments and my laws and my ordinances and my covenant.”

Benjamin Schliesser discusses the view of the author of *Jubilees* on Abraham extensively and says that altogether, Abraham’s exemplary faithfulness is described about nine times:

¹² Ibid., 495.

¹³ George W. E. Nickelsburg dates *Jubilees* in the mid-second century B.C.E. (“Abraham the Convert: A Jewish Tradition and Its Use by the Apostle Paul,” *Biblical Figures Outside the Bible* [Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1998], 152).

¹⁴ Longenecker, *Eschatology*, 211, n. 3.

The deed character of Abraham's conduct is embedded in and embraced by his continuous trust and faithfulness towards God. This relationship is tested, proved, and confirmed in various situations that require the repeated commitment to God and his promise. ... In the words of *Jubilees*: He was faithful and ready to act.¹⁵

Not far from this are the words of 1 Maccabees 2:52, strikingly similar to Romans 4:3: "Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?" Similarly, Sirach 44:19–21 reads,

Abraham was the great father of a multitude of nations, and no one has been found like him in glory. He kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful. Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath that the nations would be blessed through his offspring; that he would make him as numerous as the dust of the earth, and exalt his offspring like the stars, and give them an inheritance from sea to sea and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.

Noteworthy in Sirach 44:20 is the expression that Abraham "proved faithful" (*eurethē pistos*); Schliesser points out that, with respect to both Genesis 15:6 and Genesis 22, when "faith" is mentioned of Abraham, Ben Sira understands this as denoting Abraham's "faithfulness" to God.¹⁶ This is not unlike the approach of *Jubilees*.

The Prayer of Manasseh states plainly that Abraham did not sin against God (8).

Similarly, the *Damascus Document* says of Abraham that "he did not walk in it [i.e., evil], and he was accounted a friend of God because he kept the commandments of God and did not choose his own will."¹⁷

Josephus too describes Abraham as offering obedience to God; regarding the events of Genesis 22, Josephus describes him as one who deemed "that nothing would justify disobedience to God and that in everything he must submit to his will" (*Ant.* 1.13). As a result, we are told that God "took pleasure in what He had given [Abraham] and would never fail to regard with the tenderest care both him and his race" (*Ant.* 1.13). Similarly, Philo says of Abraham in light of this event, "He had not neglected any of God's commands, nor ever met them with repining or discontent, however charged with toils and pains they might be, and therefore he bore the sentence pronounced on his son with all nobleness and firmness" (*Abr.* 35).

¹⁵ Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4*, WUNT 2.224 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 180.

¹⁶ Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith*, 173.

¹⁷ CD 3:2–4; cf. Simon Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 236.

In the Mishnah, it is said that along with the ten wonders done for the Jewish fathers in Egypt, the ten blows against the Egyptians, and the ten trials of the fathers, there were “ten trials” which were “inflicted upon Abraham . . . and he withstood all of them” (*m. 'Abot* 5.3). Similarly, Mishnah *Qiddushin* 4:14 reads, “We find that Abraham our father had performed the whole Law before it was given.”

In other rabbinic writings, one finds expressions like: “Just like myrrh is the most excellent of all spices, Abraham was the chief of all righteous men” (*Cant. Rab.* 1.13; cf. *Pirqe R. El.* 26; *'Abot R. Nat.* 33; *Gen. Rab.* 55.2; *Lev. Rab.* 3.11; 11.7).

Others who have studied the literature have come to similar conclusions. Nancy Calvert-Koyzis concludes after doing so,

Abraham functions as the prototype of one who rejects idolatry for faith in the one God and, in many cases, expresses that faith in obedience to the law. Even in the differing historical and political circumstances in which each of the texts was written, Abraham functioned to identify primary characteristics of the people of God.¹⁸

Similarly, George W. E. Nickelsburg concludes that this literature sees Abraham as a model for religious behavior.¹⁹ It should be noted, though, that the evidence is not necessarily saying that Abraham attempted to “earn his salvation” by means of works, but it is clearly saying that Abraham was known for his obedience.

So too, G. Walter Hansen, in an appendix on “Abraham in Jewish Literature,” concludes that while E. P. Sanders’s attempt to place Abraham in a covenantal-nomist context does not entirely fail, Abraham is seen in a varied fashion in the literature of Paul’s day:

Some texts (especially OT, and, in different ways, the Psalms of Solomon and Philo) emphasize the priority of the covenant with Abraham over the Mosaic Law and interpret Abraham’s faith primarily in terms of a response to the covenantal promises. Other texts (especially Sirach, Jubilees, I Maccabees, and the rabbinic writings) interpret the Abrahamic covenant in terms of the Mosaic Law and view faith as a response of obedience to that Law.

Paul’s use of the Abraham story is more closely aligned to the first emphasis. However, his Christocentric reinterpretation of the Abrahamic covenant, his inclusion of Gentile believers within that covenant, his separation of the Mosaic law and exclusion of non-Christian Jewish lawkeepers from that covenant, and his

¹⁸ Nancy Calvert-Koyzis, *Paul, Monotheism and the People of God: The Significance of Abraham Traditions for Early Judaism and Christianity*, JSNTSup 273 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 142–43.

¹⁹ Nickelsburg, “Abraham the Convert,” 172.

understanding of faith as exclusively faith in Christ serve to highlight the fact that his portrait of Abraham must be seen in an entirely different category.²⁰

Although Longenecker has claimed support from Francis Watson's earlier work,²¹ in his more recent significant work on Paul, Watson notes in a very pertinent comment:

The term 'works' refers to actions carried out in conformity to the divine will in both Romans 4.2 and 1 Maccabees 2.51. In neither case is the concern merely with 'the obligations which marked off [the Jewish people] most clearly as the seed of Abraham, the children of Israel, the people of the law (circumcision, food laws, Sabbath, in particular ...)' (Dunn, *Romans*, I.201). The food laws and the Sabbath are not relevant to Abraham's story, and yet the possibility that Abraham was 'justified by works' is for Paul a serious (though false) interpretative option. In the case of 1 Maccabees, the works of zeal for the law inspired by the fathers consist in the actions of the three brothers, as narrated in chapters 3–6. The fact that circumcision and food laws are important in the earlier account of martyrdoms (1 Macc. 1.41–64) tells us nothing about the scope of the term 'works', as used either by the author of 1 Maccabees or by Paul.²²

Watson has suggested that Pauline theology is intertextual in form and that in order to understand how Paul reads texts of Scripture, one needs to pay attention as well to how others read the same texts. He points out that the writings of Eupolemus²³ attempt to portray Abraham as outstanding for his "zeal for piety," that *Jubilees* portrays Abraham as one who carefully observes the law to its letter, that Philo is more interested in seeing Abraham as one whose soul gradually progresses towards God, and that Josephus attempts to present Abraham in accordance with the interests of Greco-Roman historiography. The point is that all these other interpretations of Abraham also sketch Abraham as a morally exemplary figure, as one who is a "role model for human conduct in relation to God."²⁴

²⁰ G. Walter Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Contexts*, JSNTSup 29 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989), 199.

²¹ Longenecker, *Eschatology*, 212.

²² Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 182, n. 20.

²³ Watson (*Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 259, 267) refers here to "Pseudo-Eupolemus" but disputes the "pseudo" designation (259, n. 48). For a further discussion on this point, see also Nickelsburg ("Abraham the Convert," 159, n. 24), who agrees with Watson. See also James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1985), 873–82. At one point, Eupolemus notes, in a fashion similar to that of others, "Abraham excelled all in nobility and wisdom; he sought and obtained the knowledge of astrology and the Chaldean craft, and pleased God because he eagerly sought to be reverent" (Ps.-Eup. 3); see "Praeparatio Evangelica 9.17.2–9," *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* 2:880.

²⁴ Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 268.

Similarly, Jacqueline C. R. de Roo has noted that later Jewish writers were inclined to elevate the character of Abraham. De Roo cites extensive evidence from *Jubilees* to prove that Abraham was thought to be chosen by God because of his obedience;²⁵ as the story of his obedience comes before his call, the author of *Jubilees* implies that Abraham was chosen because he possessed spiritual understanding (11:16), opposed the idolatry of his family members (11:16–17; 12:1–8), acknowledged God as the only God (12:4, 16–19), and chose God (12:16–17). De Roo adds,

In short, no other figure in Judaism of Paul’s time was as revered as Abraham. He was the epitome of piety due to his perfect or, at least, close to perfect obedience to God’s will, as revealed in his good moral actions as well as in his impeccable performance of Mosaic rituals. Abraham’s piety is viewed as the basis of his divine election.²⁶

Likewise, Simon Gathercole has shown from his extensive survey of the literature of the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha that not only election but also obedience plays a significant role.²⁷ Qumran literature, according to Gathercole, is permeated with the notion that final judgment is on the basis of works.²⁸ This applies also with respect to Abraham, who is not just *an* illustration from the Hebrew Scriptures for Paul; “as our forefather,” says Gathercole, “he is *the* example. If Paul’s theology cannot accommodate him, it *must* be false.”²⁹ And so the position that Paul is opposing in 4:2, says Gathercole, is one that says “that Abraham was declared righteous *subsequent to and because of* his obedience, his faithfulness under trial.”³⁰

Clearly then, Longenecker’s view will not stand.³¹ It is not always within

²⁵ Jacqueline C. R. de Roo, “Works of the Law” at Qumran and in Paul (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2007), 101–2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 109. De Roo sees this literature of Paul’s day as containing so much evidence about the obedience of Abraham that she suggests that many saw him as a redeemer figure who actually made atonement for the sins of all Israelites and their salvation. She suggests then that, for example, Paul in Rom 4:1–5 is urging his addressees “not to view Abraham as their redeemer, but Christ” (170). There are two problems with this view, however. First, proving that many saw Abraham as especially obedient to the law of God is not the same as saying that he made atonement for the sins of others; de Roo has not given proof of the latter. Second, there does not appear to be any evidence in Paul’s letter to the Romans that Abraham was seen as a redeemer figure.

²⁷ Gathercole, *Where Is Boasting?* 90.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 235.

³¹ Don Garlington has also sought support for his New Perspective approach by referring to Longenecker’s work and suggesting that Westerholm has “an *a priori* agenda to fulfil” (Don B. Garlington, “The Obedience of Faith”: A Pauline Phrase in Historical Context, WUNT 79 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991], 257). Such an accusation, however, though repeated often (cf. *Ibid.*, 8, n. 20; 37, n. 21; 41, n. 36) can also cut two ways, especially since one looks in vain

the context of ethnocentrism that Abraham's obedience is extolled; much more is at stake than obedience to those acts that testify to his Jewishness. Abraham is commonly portrayed as an outstanding example of an ethically moral person who pleased God by all his actions.

Of course, this general perception of Abraham as obedient and performing good works alone is not enough to make the point. The real question is whether, according to this literature, *God* acknowledged Abraham to be righteous on the basis of what he did. Sprinkled among the above texts, however, are plenty of texts that suggest that this too was part of the understanding. *Jubilees* 23:10 says that "Abraham was perfect in all of his actions with the LORD and was pleasing through righteousness all of the days of his life." First Maccabees 2:52 reads, "Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?" Sirach 44:20 refers to Abraham's obedience and faithfulness and says, "Therefore the Lord assured him with an oath ..." (44:21). The *Damascus Document* says that he was "accounted a friend of God because he kept the commandments of God" (CD 3:2–4). A. Andrew Das also reviews the intertestamental evidence and concludes that Sanders and other New Perspective scholars after him have downplayed the role of obedience and the degree to which such works of obedience are seen as necessary in Second Temple Jewish thought:

Quite apart from the boundary-marking features of the Law, works of obedience—even perfect obedience—play a prominent role in Second Temple Jewish thought. Such Second Temple texts provide a necessary context for Paul's discussion of Abraham's works in Rom 4:4–5 and may be the clue to resolving the new perspective debate. ...

New perspective interpreters such as Dunn and Wright have correctly highlighted the abandonment of Jewish ethnocentrism in Paul's letters, but their central claim that his critique of the Law is *limited* to ethnocentrism does not withstand scrutiny. The Jews considered observance of the Law's works to be a necessary accompaniment of God's gracious election of the people.³²

II. Abraham: "Ungodly," But in What Sense?

Turning to the related question regarding what Paul has in mind when he references Abraham as "ungodly" in Romans 4:5, it is striking, first of all, that if Paul had Gentiles in mind here, he clearly had a word to express that (*ethnē*), and throughout Romans he does not show any hesitation to use it.

throughout his writing for any significant interaction with Westerholm's position and any significant evidence from the literature.

³² A. Andrew Das, "Paul and Works of Obedience in Second Temple Judaism: Romans 4:4–5 as a 'New Perspective' Case Study," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71.1 (2009): 803, 812.

Even if it is true that Abraham is sometimes referred to in Jewish literature as the first believing Gentile, this is not what Paul is referring to when he uses the word *asebēs*. According to Walter Bauer, that word relates to “violating norms for a proper relation to deity, *irreverent, impious, ungodly*.”³³ It is simply not faithful to what Paul writes to suggest that he means something like “to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies *the Gentile* ...” As Gathercole has pointed out, “the category of the ‘ungodly’ is not restricted to *Gentiles*.”³⁴ The intent of the word *asebēs* is to emphasize a lack of godly qualities. This is apparent from how Paul uses the term and its cognates elsewhere in Romans. In 1:18 he uses it as a reference to the ungodliness of all people (*epi pasan asebeian kai adikian anthrōpōn*). In 5:6 he uses *asebōn* as a play on words with *asthenōn*, emphasizing human inability, helplessness. In 5:6, it would surely do injustice to the text to consider *asebēs* as referring first of all to pagan status, for then it would amount to Paul considering himself a Gentile and the ensuing argument would be lost. And the ensuing argument is again clearly about those who are morally sinners and Jesus who is not. In 11:26, Paul quotes Isaiah 59:26 and suggests that “all Israel will be saved” only by having *asebeia* removed from Israel!

As Fiedler says, “to use Abraham as an example of the believing *asebēs* is entirely un-Jewish.”³⁵ But it is entirely in accord with what Paul is saying in this context: Abraham has no righteous works to boast of before God. Watson has confirmed that the literature of Paul’s time would be loath to use such a word for Abraham; in fact, Philo uses its very antonym when he describes Abraham as one who, “filled with zeal for piety, the highest and greatest of virtues, was eager to follow God” (*ekeinos toinun eusebeias, aretēs tēs anatatō kai megistēs, zēlōtēs genomenos espouasen epesthai theō*).³⁶ Paul, says Watson, has a different understanding of Abraham:

Paul claims that Genesis 15.6 speaks only of a single defining moment in Abraham’s life, when he gave credence to the specific divine promise, “Thus shall your seed be” (v. 5); it is this act of credence that constitutes Abraham’s righteousness before God. Abraham, then, is simply the recipient of the promise, the beneficiary of future divine saving action, of which he can be absolutely sure because it has been promised, and because that promise is divine and therefore credible in spite of its apparently incredible content. If we ask who Abraham is apart from the promise, Paul’s

³³ BDAG 141.

³⁴ Simon Gathercole, “Justified by Faith, Justified by His Blood: The Evidence of Romans 3:21–4:25,” in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, ed. D. A. Carson, P. T. O’Brien, and M. Seifrid (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 158.

³⁵ P. Fiedler, “*asebēs*,” *EDNT* 1: 169.

³⁶ Philo, *On Abraham*, 60; cf. Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith*, 244.

answer is simply that he belongs to the company of the ‘ungodly,’ whom God justifies and whose sins are therefore forgiven (Rom. 4.5–8).³⁷

Of course, there is a reason why New Perspective authors wish to understand *asebēs* as “Gentile.” Since there is a desire to remove the question of deeds and merit out of the discussion as much as possible, this word—which indicates that Abraham, like all those others referred to in 3:20, failed to meet the appropriate divine standard—needs to be interpreted differently. The interpretation fails, however. What Paul writes reinforces what was said in the former section: righteousness needs to be given to Abraham, because on his own, he is not righteous but ungodly, impious, and unrighteous.

Schliesser shares the concerns discussed here, pointing out that too often “exegetes take the edge of [*sic*] Paul’s statement by neglecting or obscuring the identification of the ‘ungodly one’ with Abraham or by ignoring the problem altogether.”³⁸ Some have suggested that Paul is making a more general statement and is not saying specifically that Abraham was ungodly.³⁹ Surely, however, to exclude Abraham from this statement destroys the whole logic of what Paul is writing in Romans 4:3–5. As Schliesser says,

Nowhere does Scripture call Abraham (anything like) “ungodly,” yet it is impossible *not* to deduce from the apostle’s line of thought that he *de facto* does so. Though Abraham is not mentioned specifically in 4:4–5, he is the case in point and example *par excellence* for what takes place. ...

Abraham remained in the sphere of ungodliness (1:18–3:20), as long as faith did not govern his life. ... Paul even stretches his thought back to the beginning of his letter: There, Gentiles are accused of ‘ungodliness,’ which equals unrighteousness (*adikia*), suppressing the truth of God’s faithfulness (1:18), ignorance towards God the creator and his power (1:20), and the rejection to give glory to God (1:21). ... Hence, all have sinned and are apart from faith, Gentiles and Jews, and their sinfulness and ungodliness is not merely a passive being apart from God, but an active neglect of his godliness.⁴⁰

The concern of Paul is not to define certain moments in Abraham’s life when he sinned. Instead, it is a matter of Abraham belonging to the general human condition: weak, ungodly, and sinful, as Paul has described in the

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 252.

³⁸ Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith*, 345.

³⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer says, for instance, that the phrase *epi ton dikaiounta ton asebe* does not “mean that Abraham was himself *asebes*” (*Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1993], 375), and William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam have argued that 4:5 is not a description of Abraham (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968], 101).

⁴⁰ Schliesser, *Abraham’s Faith*, 345, 347.

opening chapters of his letter.⁴¹ To come back to the early part of Romans 5, where the conclusions of chapter 4 are being drawn, it is noteworthy that the word *asthenōn* is used in the same breath as *asebōn* in 5:6, since there as well as in 4:5, the sense seems to be that the *asebōn* (ungodly) are the ones who are *asthenōn* (weak, without strength)—what they need they must receive as a gift because they do not have the necessary resources of themselves. This classic interpretation of 4:1–5 is confirmed in 4:18–25, where the aged patriarch and his wife have no resources left but God’s promise, and it is applied to the new people of God in 5:1–11.

Another surprising aspect in all of this is that God is said to be one who “justifies the ungodly” (*ton dikaiounta ton asebeōn*). For anyone familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, which often speak against justifying such people (Prov 17:15; Isa 5:23; Exod 23:7), this is startling once again. Exodus 23:7 uses almost the same expression but then as something God will not do (*ou dikaiōseis ton asebeōn*). Isaiah 5:23 also uses the same words as it denounces those who “justify the ungodly” (*oi dikaiountes ton asebeōn*). But in Paul’s view, the surprise here is not that God justifies Gentiles rather than Jews, but that he justifies those who have no ground for such justification in themselves but instead should really be found guilty. As Halvor Moxnes puts it, “The most polemical and provocative argument in his controversy with Jews was this description of God in Rom 4:5, that he justifies the ungodly.”⁴² Robert Jewett says,

The general pattern in the Hebrew Scriptures and subsequent Judaism is that God justifies only those who obey the law. Something radically new is in view here, even though Abraham is employed as the precedent, namely that God in Christ restores a right relationship with those who have not earned it.⁴³

Paul has already explained now how this is possible: justification is by God’s grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (3:24–25). In Westerholm’s terms, God gives extraordinary righteousness precisely to those who have no ordinary righteousness of their own.

In conclusion, the “old perspective” on Abraham, not unlike the “old perspective” on Paul, is pretty much on the mark.

⁴¹ Ibid., 348.

⁴² Halvor Moxnes, *Theology in Conflict: Studies in Paul’s Understanding of God in Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 110.

⁴³ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 314.