

John 8:39

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

They answered and said unto him, Abraham is our father. Jesus saith unto them, If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham.

Analysis

Abraham is our father—They reassert biological descent (σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ/ sperma Abraam, v.33, 37) as guarantee of covenant status. In Jewish theology, Abraham's merit (צדקה/zekhut avot, 'merit of the fathers') provided spiritual covering for his descendants. The Mishnah records belief that Abraham's righteousness could atone for Israel's sins. They trusted lineage, not personal faith.

If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham—The conditional εἰ (ei) with imperfect tense ἐποιεῖτε (epoieite) creates contrary-to-fact statement: 'If you were (but you're not), you would do (but you don't).' Jesus distinguishes biological descent (which they possess) from spiritual paternity (which requires resemblance). The phrase 'works of Abraham' (τὰ ἔργα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ/ta erga tou Abraam) points to Abraham's defining characteristic: faith-obedience.

What were Abraham's works? Genesis 15:6: 'He believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness'—faith was his foundational work. Abraham obeyed God's call, leaving Ur (Genesis 12:1-4). He believed God's promise of impossible offspring (Genesis 15:1-6, Romans 4:18-21). He offered Isaac, trusting God's resurrection power (Genesis 22:1-19, Hebrews 11:17-19). He welcomed heavenly visitors with hospitality (Genesis 18:1-8). Abraham's works flowed from faith in God's word—precisely what Jesus's opponents lacked. They rejected God's

word incarnate (v.37), proving themselves NOT Abraham's spiritual children despite biological connection. This anticipates Paul's argument in Romans 4 and Galatians 3: true Abraham's children are those who share his faith, not merely his DNA.

Historical Context

First-century Judaism centered heavily on Abrahamic descent. The daily Amidah prayer invoked 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' Circumcision on the eighth day enrolled males into Abraham's covenant (Genesis 17:9-14). Passover liturgy recounted God's promises to Abraham. The Mishnah tractate Avot (Fathers) begins 'Moses received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it...—tracing rabbinic authority through unbroken chain to Mosaic revelation, which fulfilled Abrahamic covenant.

The concept of זכאות אבות (zehut avot, 'merit of the fathers') permeated Jewish thought. The Babylonian Talmud (Shabbat 55a) debates whether Israel was redeemed from Egypt by their own merit or the fathers' merit, concluding Abraham's merit sufficed. This created dangerous presumption: many assumed covenant membership through descent guaranteed salvation regardless of personal faith or obedience.

Jesus's redefinition of Abraham's children challenged this entire framework. He insisted that true descent requires resemblance—children act like their father. James 2:21-23 echoes this: 'Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar?...and the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness.' True children of Abraham believe God's word and obey it—the very thing Jesus's opponents refused to do.

Paul develops this thoroughly in Romans 4:11-12: Abraham 'received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised...And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father

Abraham.' Physical descent means nothing without faith; faith alone makes one Abraham's true child.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How do we sometimes rely on religious heritage, church membership, or family background instead of personal faith in Christ?
2. What were Abraham's defining 'works,' and how do they challenge contemporary understandings of faith versus works?
3. How does Jesus's redefinition of Abraham's children anticipate the gospel's inclusion of Gentiles through faith?

Interlinear Text

Απεκρίθησαν	καὶ	εἶπον	αὐτοῖς	Ο	πατὴρ	ἡμῶν	Ἄβραὰμ	
They answered	and	said	unto him	G3588	father	our	Abraham	
G611	G2532	G2036	G846		G3962	G2257	G11	
ἐστιν	λέγει	αὐτοῖς	ό	Ἰησοῦς	Ei	τέκνα	τοῦ	Ἄβραὰμ
is	saith	unto him	G3588	Jesus	If	children	G3588	Abraham
G2076	G3004	G846		G2424	G1487	G5043		G11
ἢτε,	τὰ	ἔργα	τοῦ	Ἄβραὰμ	ἐποιεῖτε	ἄν		
ye were	G3588	the works	G3588	Abraham	ye would do	G302		
G2258		G2041		G11	G4160			

Additional Cross-References

Galatians 3:7 (References Abraham): Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham.

Romans 9:7 (References Abraham): Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, are they all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called.

John 8:37 (References Abraham): I know that ye are Abraham's seed; but ye seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you.

Matthew 5:45 (Parallel theme): That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

Matthew 3:9 (References Abraham): And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham.

Romans 4:12 (References Abraham): And the father of circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised.

Romans 4:16 (References Abraham): Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,

Galatians 3:29 (References Abraham): And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.