

Romans 4:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found?

Analysis

What shall we say then that Abraham our father, as pertaining to the flesh, hath found? Paul launches his exposition with a rhetorical question that would arrest any Jewish reader: What did Abraham discover *kata sarka* (κατὰ σάρκα, "according to the flesh")? The phrase carries layered meaning—Abraham as physical ancestor, but also achievement through human effort. After demolishing both Gentile paganism (1:18-32) and Jewish presumption (2:1-3:20), Paul must now address the inevitable objection: What about Abraham, the father of faith?

This question frames Paul's entire argument in Romans 4. Jewish theology in the Second Temple period had increasingly portrayed Abraham as righteous through his obedience, his willingness to sacrifice Isaac earning his justified status. Paul will systematically dismantle this works-based reading by appealing to Genesis 15:6, showing that Abraham's faith preceded both circumcision (Gen 17) and the Akedah (Gen 22). The patriarch becomes Paul's chief exhibit that justification has always been by faith alone.

Historical Context

In first-century Judaism, Abraham was revered not just as patriarch but as the paradigm of righteousness. Texts like Jubilees, 1 Maccabees 2:52, and Sirach 44:19-21 portrayed him as justified through works—particularly his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. Paul's Roman audience, both Jewish and Gentile believers, would

have immediately recognized this as the central debate: Does covenant membership depend on Torah observance and circumcision, or on faith in Christ?

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. Why does Paul choose Abraham specifically to prove justification by faith rather than any other Old Testament figure?
2. How does the question 'as pertaining to the flesh' set up Paul's distinction between human achievement and divine gift?
3. In what ways do we still try to claim spiritual inheritance 'according to the flesh' through heritage, ritual, or moral effort?

Interlinear Text

Τί	οὖν	ἐροῦμεν	Ἀβραὰμ	τὸν	πατέρα	ἡμῶν	εὗρηκέναι
What	then	shall we say	that Abraham	G3588	father	our	hath found
G5101	G3767	G2046	G11		G3962	G2257	G2147
κατὰ	σάρκα						
as pertaining	to the flesh						
G2596	G4561						

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 51:2 (References Abraham): Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him.

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,

Acts 13:26 (References Abraham): Men and brethren, children of the stock of Abraham, and whosoever among you feareth God, to you is the word of this salvation sent.

John 8:56 (References Abraham): Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.

2 Corinthians 11:22 (References Abraham): Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I.

Romans 7:7 (Parallel theme): What shall we say then? Is the law sin? God forbid. Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.

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.