

# SOME COMMENTS ON PAUL'S USE OF GENESIS IN HIS EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

by  
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## *Introduction*

Both Wescott and Hort, and Nestle, in their editions of the Greek New Testament, provides the reader with a list of the Old Testament quotations made by New Testament writers. The lists in these two editions do not exactly agree, as might be expected, for exact indications of source material was not required in the literary canons of classical times. Yet, these lists are in substantial agreement. It is upon them, as well as upon a careful reading of Romans on my own part, that I base the parallels which shall be studied in this paper.

By combining the lists of quotations from Genesis in Romans given by Westcott and Hort, and Nestle, we have:<sup>1</sup>

<i>Romans</i>	<i>Genesis</i>
4:3,9	15:6
4:11	17:10,11
4:17	17:5
4:18	15:5
4:22,23	15:6
9:7	21:12
9:9	18:10,14
9:12	25:23

This list can be conveniently divided into two sections: the use of Genesis in Romans Chapters 4 and 9.<sup>2</sup> A further reference to Genesis in the Roman Epistle, which is not cited by either Westcott and Hort, or Nestle, is that which occurs in Romans 5:12-21. Here no exact quotation from the book of Genesis is given (thus the exclusion of this passage from the above list), but undeniable dependence upon Genesis 3 (the account of the Fall of Man) exists.

Thus our topic easily divides itself into three major sections, corresponding to the use of Genesis in Romans 4, 5, and 9. Although many subjects for profitable discussion can be found in these passages, I should like to devote this paper to an analysis of *one* problem connected with *each* of the three. In the case of Romans 4 and 5 the problem is *soteriological* (the way of salvation, the results of salvation, respectively), in Romans 9, theological (in the etymological sense of the "Science of God") and apologetical. I am hopeful that these three brief discussions will touch the heart of the passages in question, and will have genuine relevance to the Christian *Weltanschauung* in the milieu of our times.

## *The Use of Genesis in Romans 4 (Soteriology: The Way of Salvation)*

At the conclusion of Romans 3 (vs. 21-31) we have Paul's classic exposition of the doctrine which has come to be known as *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, or, more popularly, "salvation by grace through faith, apart from works." In Chapter 4, Paul illustrates this great soteriological concept by an appeal to the life of the patriarch Abraham (Genesis 15:5, 6; 17:5, 10-11). A preliminary question which suggests itself, and which should be considered before we go on to the real problem here, is that of why Paul should have used Abraham for the purpose of illustration. Was not the Church at Rome primarily a Gentile one? Why should Paul have used a person who lived and died so many years before, under a dispensation that had been replaced by the New Covenant in Christ's blood—a person, furthermore, whose life

was recorded only in the sacred literature of the Hebrew nation? The answer to this (which answer, incidentally, will give us a basis for understanding why Paul referred to Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob and Esau in Romans 9, *vid inf.*, and for that matter, why he referred to the book of Genesis at all) — the answer to this, it seems to me, is at least a two-fold one: (1) The Old Testament Scriptures gradually diffused into the most Gentile church, since Jews were the first preachers of the Gospel, and since Christ was the fulfillment of prophecy and revelation contained only in these Scriptures. If we assume that any part of the Old Testament had reached the church at Rome, certainly the first book of the Torah would have been that part, and of the lives recorded in it, that of the greatest Hebrew of them all—Abraham—would almost definitely have been most familiar to its readers. (2) The church at Rome, although in the main composed of Gentiles, was not entirely such. Drs. Sanday and Headlam, in their magnificent exegetical commentary on Romans (in the International Critical Commentary series) summarize an early section of their discussion on the components of the church at Rome with these words: "We may take it then as established that there were Jews in the Church, and that in substantial numbers ;just as we also cannot doubt that there was a substantial number of Gentiles."<sup>3</sup> Thus Paul undoubtedly cited Abraham to increase the force of his argument with those Jewish Christians in the church. Perhaps some of the "Judaizers", who had troubled Paul so much at Antioch and Jerusalem, had come to Rome and were attempting to place the heavy yoke of the law on Gentile converts; if so, Paul would have recognized the tremendous weight which reference to "father Abraham" would carry with them. The crushing weight of Paul's argument that the covenant with Abraham was established *prior* to his circumcision could not help but shake both the Judaizers and those Gentiles who were contemplating circumcision. Paul certainly knew from his Rabbinic studies under Gamaliel that he had Talmudic authority on the side of his interpretation of Genesis 15:6, etc., and this would carry the greatest weight with traditionalists. To cite one example from the Talmud, we have the following commentary on Genesis 15:6 in the treatise *Mechilta*; correspondence with Paul's argument will be observed to be exact:

Great is faith, whereby Israel believed on Him that spake and the world was. For as a reward for Israel's having believed in the Lord, the Holy Spirit dwelt in them . . . in like manner thou findest that Abraham our father inherited this world and the world to come solely by the merit of faith, whereby he believed in the Lord; for it is said, "and he believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness."<sup>4</sup>

But the real problem which confronts us with regard to Paul's use of the life of Abraham to support his soteriological argument, is not why he used Abraham, but how he could have used Abraham to support a *sola fide, sola gratia* doctrine while St. James used the same reference to Abraham to prove what seems to be a doctrine of *fide et factis* (James 2:14-26).

This is of course not the sort of problem which we can hope to exhaust in a brief paper; if Martin Luther believed reconciliation between James and Paul to be so difficult that he wanted to "fire his stove" with James, who are we to pass final judgment on the mutual relationship of these two canonical books? Yet I believe that the problem of *rapprochement* is not as difficult as it might seem at first—or even second—glance.

A good while before Luther—or even Paul and James—lived, the most famous literary critic of all time wrote on the matter of supposed contradictions. "One should first test as one does an opponent's confutation in a dialectical argument, so as to see whether he means the same thing, in the same relation, and in the same sense, before admitting he has contradicted."<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that a valid application of this principle can be made in the case of the alleged opposition between Paul and James

on the *sine qua non* for salvation. Let us consider the meaning of the word "belief" (pistis) or "to believe" (pisteuo) in Paul and James. James' use of the word is very clear from 2:19. "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder." Now in what sense do demons "believe"? Do they have full "head and heart" knowledge of God, and yet simply not carry out that belief in terms of conduct? Such an explanation is ridiculous. Obviously, demons have only a "head"—or intellectual—knowledge that God is one; they do not in any sense believe with the heart. This makes clear why Thayer, in his standard (although admittedly dated) *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* gives as one of the denotations of pisteuo in reference to God, "the mere acknowledgement of his existence", and quotes in support *hoti ho theos eis estin*—James 2:19<sup>6</sup> The fact that James uses pisteuo in a purely intellectual sense in 2:19 makes it only reasonable to take this as his meaning throughout the section 2:14-26. From this standpoint, James is simply saying that demon-like head belief is not sufficient for salvation, and the evidence for the presence of such a non-efficacious form of belief in a person is that he produces no fruit.

Paul, on the other hand, uses the term belief in a way which could hardly be further from that of "mere acknowledgment of God's existence." Paul came to belief in Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road — in an experience which would deserve Kierkegaard's designation "existential" if any situation would. Paul entered with his whole being into the decision to follow Christ; he deserted all—family, friends, security—to go in a direction diametrically opposed to his previous one. And he never wavered. Paul's definition of belief is clearly contingent upon his own experience. What obedience to the law and the commentaries on the law and the commentaries on the commentaries could not do—give him freedom from the sin which plagued him, this act of belief accomplished. Was anything needed for salvation other than it? Certainly not, for, being the cause of a complete transformation in the believer, it produces everything else worthwhile. Sanday and Headlam perfectly sum up the approach of Paul to the matter of belief when they say:

Christianity is with him a tremendous over-mastering force. The crisis came at the moment when he confessed his faith in Christ; there was no other crisis worth the name after that. Ask such an one whether his faith is not to be proved by action, and the question will seem to him trivial and superfluous. He will almost suspect the questioner of attempting to bring back under a new name the old Jewish notion of religion as a round of legal observance. Of course action will correspond with faith. The believer in Christ, who has put on Christ, who has died with Christ and risen again with him, must needs to the very utmost of his power endeavor to live as Christ would have him live. St. Paul is going on presently to say this (Rom. vi. 1, 12, 15), as his opponents compel him to say it. But to himself it appears a truism, which is hardly worth definitely enunciating. To say that a man is a Christian should be enough.<sup>7</sup>

Thus by following Aristotle's dictum, we have discovered that Paul and James do not contradict themselves because they do not use the term "belief" to mean "the same thing, in the same relation, and in the same sense." This of course vindicates their common use of Genesis 15:6. Paul says that Abraham was justified by the relationship with God which he entered upon by faith—and that this happened prior to Abraham's circumcision which simply resulted as a natural consequence of his belief. James says that Abraham was justified, not by the intellectual belief which even the demons possess, but by a faith whose genuineness was manifested in his actually placing his only son Isaac on an altar to be offered in sacrifice to God, if God should so desire.<sup>8</sup>

#### *The Use of Genesis in Romans 5 (Soteriology: the Results of Salvation)*

The general purpose which seems to underlie all of Paul's uses of Genesis in his Epistle to the Romans is an effort to demonstrate *fulfillment*: he tries to show that the actions, the doctrines, and the very appearance of Jesus Christ were the logical

counterpart of, and capstone for the book which both in name and content formed the beginning of God's written revelation."<sup>9</sup> In the Romans passage just discussed we saw how Paul used the life of Abraham to show that salvation by faith was not a new concept, antithetical to the Hebrew Scriptures, but was rather the very way of salvation by which the greatest of the Patriarchs came into a covenant relation with God. In the Romans 9 passage which we shall consider below, we shall see that Paul presents as his prime evidence for the great doctrine of the sovereignty of God two instances of divine activity recorded in Genesis. In Romans 5 we have perhaps the most clear attempt of all on Paul's part to show the correspondence between the revelation of God in Genesis and His full revelation in the Person of Jesus Christ.

In verses 12-21 of this chapter Paul parallels Christ and Adam very closely with regard to their work. By doing this he shows the vital relation which exists between Christ and the revelation of God in Genesis. The relation between Christ and Adam is briefly this: what Adam ruined, Christ restored. The thoroughness of this restoration, since it often escapes the eye of the reader of this passage, should be emphasized here. Let us set down, in parallel columns, the work of Adam and Christ, as Paul gives it to us:

#### *Thesis*

"If many died through one man's trespass,

"T h e judgment following one's trespass brought condemnation,

"If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man,

"As one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men,

"As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners,

#### *Antithesis*

Much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." (v. 15)

But the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. (v. 16)

Much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ." (v. 17)

So one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men." (v. 18)

So by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." (v. 19)

Notice that four things resulted from Adam's sin, and that Christ effectively counteracted each one of them:

#### *Adam brought about*

Sin (v. 19)

Judgment (v. 16)

Condemnation (v. 18)

Death (v. 17)

#### *Christ brought about*

Righteousness (v. 79)

Justification (v. 16)

Acquittal (v. 18)

Life (v. 17)

Thus everything which Adam ruined by his fall, Christ restored<sup>10</sup> —and we should not miss the fact that this restoration was even greater than necessary (note the "much more" in vs. 15, 17).

It seems to me that two important deductions can validly be made from the parallelisms of Christ and Adam given in this section. The extreme closeness of the correspondence made between them by Paul makes one confident in drawing further implications than those which appear on the surface. The first such implication concerns those who reap the results of Adam's work and that of Christ. In verse 18 the words "all men" appear in both protasis and apodosis of Paul's sentence. Shall we therefore conclude that universal salvation was accomplished by Christ? The answer to this is of course No, as we see from many passages in Paul, the clearest of which is probably II Thessalonians 1:7-10. Paul always couples *faith* on the individual's part with reception of the gifts which Christ made available. Simply the act of one man (Christ) does not automatically save all men—they must believe in order to receive the salvation which Christ obtained for them. But if this is so, we can validly ask the question, does the sin of one man (Adam) automatically bring eternal death to all men? To be consistent with the parallelisms in the passage under discussion, we must answer No to this question also. A glance at verse 12 shows that we are reasoning correctly. We read, "Death spread to all men *because all men sinned.*" Death was brought upon the human race by Adam's sin, but each individual death from sin is a result of the personal sins of that individual; even as Christ brought life to the human race, but the salvation of each individual is contingent upon his personal acceptance of Christ's gift. Thus we see the wisdom of the doctrine (which the majority of Protestant bodies accept to-day) that infants and others who die without reaching a state of accountability are not damned. It is unfortunate that in past centuries a more careful study of this chapter was not made by theologians.

The second implication which, I believe, can be made from the exacting parallel between Christ and Adam in this chapter, is the necessity of including in one's theology belief in Adam's historicity. It seems evident to me that since Paul believed that the benefits which were brought upon the human race by Christ could not have come about except through His actual, personal existence, righteous life, and death on the Cross (see I Cor. 15:1-6), he is trying to tell us here that the sin and death which mankind experiences could not have come about unless there was an actual first man who knowingly violated God's will. I am saying nothing as to the time at which Adam lived, nor anything concerning his physical make-up, of course; my only point is that a reasonable deduction from the passage in question is that there was a first man, and that he sinned. Of the relation between an historical Fall of Man and regeneration through Christ, Ruth Paxson says:

To understand and accept John 3, one must understand and accept Genesis 3. The one necessitates the other, for the truth revealed is as closely related as cause and effect. To deny Genesis 3 which reveals the entrance of sin into human life, separating man from God, is to deny John 3 which reveals the entrance of the Saviour into human life, reuniting man with God. To deny either is to deny the "unique, divine inspiration, integrity and authority of the Bible." If Genesis 3 is not true, then there is no need for and no sense in John 3. If Genesis 3 is a myth, then John 3 is a farce. In a peculiar way these two passages in the Holy Scriptures either stand or fall together.<sup>11</sup>

If this argument concerning Genesis 3 and John 3 is valid, how much more valid is our argument involving the relationship between Genesis 3 and Romans 5, when in the latter passage genuine and exact parallels are drawn between Adam and Christ?

### *The Use of Genesis in Romans 9 (Theology and Apologetics)*

In Romans 9:6-15 Paul presents the argument that God's will is the final court of appeal in all matters. He supports this thesis by reference to two incidents recorded in the book of Genesis: God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael as Abraham's true successor (Gen. 18:10, 14; 21:12), and His choice of Jacob over Esau even before the birth

of the twins (Gen. 25:23). Now the decisiveness of Paul's argument, and the appropriateness of his illustrations have not seemed to faze in the least many Bible interpreters who have apparently desired above all else to rid Christianity of the doctrine of a sovereign God.<sup>12</sup> The notion of God's will as the ultimate determinant of the course of the universe has impressed many as a horrifying principle: a principle that permits God to be a capricious tyrant. Without entering into the *a priori*-ridden question of predestination-freewill (which, after all, pertains more especially to that section of Romans 9 immediately following our area of discussion), I shall attempt to give a few reasons to show that the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is *essential* to both Christian theology and apologetics.

It should be remarked first that a denial of the sovereignty of God's will in the universe requires one to take the position that *God is finite*. The truth of this assertion may not be evident at first glance, but a little reflection will cause us to see its validity. If God is not sovereign, then *ex hypothesi* there must be something beyond God's control, and if there is something beyond His control—no matter how insignificant—He can no longer be considered infinite in all respects. Some theologians and Bible students have thought to circumvent the problem of the sovereignty of God by supposing that God has "limited himself" during the course of world history—that he has permitted natural law and the will of man to determine events on this globe. But needless to say, this does not avoid the issue. If *God* limited himself (assuming that God would do such a thing), then he is still sovereign, because he did the limiting; however, if this limitation was not accomplished by God himself, then he is no longer infinite. There are only two alternatives: either God is sovereign or he is not; and if he is not, then he is finite. Needless to say, nothing is more pitiful or less worthy of the designation "theology" than a system of religious doctrine which is not God-centered. A God who is in any sense contingent is hardly a worthy object of worship. If God were such, man would be more reasonable in worshipping that upon which he was contingent.

In the realm of Christian apologetics, there is no principle of greater importance than that of God's sovereignty: the right of God to act as He wills. Unbelievers like William James may say that an apologetic appeal to God's will is an "asylum of ignorance", but a logically impregnable asylum it is, none the less. Unless as Christians we are able to appeal to God's unfathomable will in the case of those problems the solution to which God has not given us in His Revelation, e.g., "surd" evil in the world, eternal damnation in the world to come, our entire faith can be blasted as unworthy of allegiance. But with this principle as our final stronghold, we cannot logically be defeated. We may not be able to provide satisfactory answers to the ever-recurring question of the non-Christian, "But why did God do this?", yet at least we need not apologize for our lack of knowledge. We may be troubled within ourselves at not being able to solve issues which involve God's eternal plan, but we need not despair. For if God is sovereign, what He wills is best for us, by definition. It is truly unfortunate to see a Christian go down in defeat in the face of a barrage of accusations that his God is not just or good, when if he believed thoroughly enough in God's sovereignty, he could square his shoulders and simply say that such-and-such is God's will—and that it is ridiculous for the vessel to question the potter who made it.

Many have tried to argue that if God's will is sovereign, we have no way of distinguishing between contradictory or varying conceptions of Deity. The argument is that everyone will say that his God is the true God—absolute in sovereignty and therefore unable to be judged by human standards. The most challenging statement of this position is undoubtedly that made by William Ellery Channing, the "Apostle of Unitarianism." Channing argues:

It is no slight objection to the mode of reasoning adopted by the Calvinist, that it renders the proof of the divine attributes impossible. When we object to his representations of the divine government, that they shock our clearest thoughts of goodness and justice, he replies, that still they may be true, because we know very little of God, and what seems unjust to man may be in the Creator the perfection of rectitude. Now this weapon has a double edge. If the strongest marks and expressions of injustice do not prove God unjust, then the strongest marks of the opposite character do not prove him righteousness. If the first do not deserve confidence, because of our narrow views of God, neither do the last. If, when more shall be known, the first may be found consistent with perfect rectitude, so, when more shall be known, the last may be found consistent with infinite malignity and oppression.<sup>13</sup>

Now the invalidity of this argument lies in the fact that even if we refuse to judge God by human standards of morality (and Channing never seems to be able to escape the charge of anthropomorphism which can be leveled against him), we can still distinguish between concepts of God by the *standard of truth* (internal consistency, and external correspondence with reality). Although what is good or bad, right or wrong (i.e., questions in the realm of *imperative* rather than *descriptive* science) only God can ultimately decide, He has given us competent means of deciding for or against a system by its adherence to the standard of truth. We can judge competently between gods by determining which one is "systematically consistent."<sup>14</sup> This in no way removes from God's sovereignty, because God must speak to His creatures in the only language they understand—the inner language which underlies their every meaningful word and thought—the language of logic.<sup>15</sup> This fact has been perceived by those Christians who have argued so vehemently for a Bible which is free from inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies—these believers have seen that although we cannot judge the morality of God's actions (as Channing desires to do) we can and must judge His truthfulness, for unless God's standard of truth is our standard of truth, there would be no way of His conveying a revelation to us.

Thus we see that the sovereignty of God is an essential element for any worthy theology and any persuasive apologetic—and we see that belief in this doctrine in no way cuts us off from intelligent choice among religious options. Paul rightly perceived that from the very opening pages of Scripture—where God had inspired a recording of His dealings with the patriarchs—the divine principle had been set down in bold letters that God's ways are higher than man's ways, and His thoughts higher than our thoughts.

## NOTES

1. Westcott and Hort (Macmillan, 1948), pp. 608-9; Nestle (20th edition), pp. 658-9.
2. Because of the brevity of this paper, I shall not quote these or other lengthy Bible passages in full, nor give detailed paraphrases of them. The reader is referred to any good modern translation of the Scriptures. (N.B. When I do make exact biblical quotations, I employ the Revised Standard Version (1946) for the New Testament, but the Authorized Version for the Old Testament.)
3. Sanday and Headlam, p. xxxiii. The reader is referred to the whole of this discussion on the origin, composition, status and condition of the Roman church, pp. xxv-xxxvi.
4. Quoted by Bishop Lightfoot (*Galatians*, 2nd ed., p. 160).
5. Aristotle, *The Art of Poetry* (*De Arte Poetica*), 1460b-1461b.
6. Thayer (4th ed.), p. 512, article "pisteuo".
7. Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
8. The true similarity between the teachings of Paul and James on justification, which I have attempted to demonstrate here, strikes at the very heart of the critical school of Pauline interpreters who have claimed that there was a deep-rooted opposition between Paul and James, that one wrote to refute the other, that Luke wrote the Acts to create an artificial, non-historical reconciliation between the two, etc., etc. (See Conybeare and Howson, *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, Ch. VII.) It is interesting to see the extent to which non-believers will go to strike wedges between Paul and Jesus (whose simple religion, they say, was carried on by faithful disciples like James, but perverted by Paul).
9. Romans 15:8: "I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy."
10. It is to be noted that in Rom. 8:19-23 Paul states that at the end of the age Christ will even restore the "creation" (ktisis, "nature"—Thayer, p. 363) to its pristine glory, as well as provide the saved with resurrected bodies.

11. Ruth Paxson, "Regeneration—the Inescapable Imperative", p. 5. (Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, reprinted in booklet form from *His Magazine*.)
12. See the brief article by Sanday and Headlam, "A History of the Interpretation of Rom. 9:6-29," *op. cit.*, pp. 269-275.
13. Channing, *The Moral Argument against Calvinism*, p. 234. (Quoted in Edward John Carnell, *A Philosophy of the Christian Religion*, p. 342.)
14. See Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics*, Ch. III ("The Problem of Truth") p. 45ff.
15. That the laws of logic must be presupposed for any meaningful interchange of ideas that has been masterfully shown by Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, IV (1005b-1006a).

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