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## THE ISSUE OF FAITH IN THE LETTERS OF SAINT PAUL. THE CASE OF ABRAHAM IN ROM 4 AND ITS IMPORTANCE

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ZAGADNIENIE WIARY W LISTACH ŚW. PAWŁA.

POSTAĆ ABRAHAMA W RZ 4 I JEJ ZNACZENIE

**STRESZCZENIE:** Wychodząc od analizy czwartego rozdziału Listu do Rzymian autor podejmuje zagadnienie wiary w listach Pawłowych. Chociaż św. Paweł podaje Abrahama jako przykład wiary, zarysowuje jednocześnie, że w celu osiągnięcia pełni wiary potrzebne jest przyjście Chrystusa. Jednocześnie na uwagę zasługuje fakt, że wiara nie łączy się, według nauki Apostoła Narodów, z wypełnianiem Prawa Mojżeszowego, którego w czasach Abrahama jeszcze nie było. Pełnię dostępnych środków umożliwiających rozwój wiary jak i osiągnięcie jej owoców św. Paweł widzi w chrystologicznej perspektywie wiary, która umożliwia zbawienie.

**SŁOWA KLUCZE:** Abraham, obrzezanie, wiara, obietnica, usprawiedliwienie, Prawo, Rdz 17; Rz 4

**KEYWORDS:** Abraham, circumcision, faith, promise, justification, the Law, Gen 17; Rom 4

For readers of the Pauline letters who truly want to know what the Apostle Paul thinks about faith, it is important to read Rom 4, the most explicit passage on the subject. One will undoubtedly say that not having Christ or the Gospel as its object, the faith of Abraham remained inchoative, imperfect and that Rom 10:8-15 is more reflective of the experience of faith in its complete and fulfilled form because its origin and object is the Gospel. Without a doubt, Rom 10, which I presented at Lublin several years ago<sup>1</sup>, clearly highlights the relationship that exists between faith - faith in Christ - and salvation<sup>2</sup>. But this passage would not be pertinent if it had not been preceded by Rom 4 and even Rom 1-3. Because to the Christian who says that it is necessary to believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved, the faithful Jew will retort that he does not need to believe in Jesus Christ in

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. „Zbawienie a głoszenie ewangelii”, *Jezus jako Syn Boży. W Nowym Testamencie i we wczesnej literaturze chrześcijańskiej* 1 (red. H. DRAWNEL) (Analecta Biblica Lublinensia; Lublin 2007) I, 81-99.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rom 10:9: “if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (RSV).

order to be saved because, for him, the Law<sup>3</sup> is what Jesus Christ is for the non-Jew. Because for the Jew, to believe in God is to believe in what his word asks and then to obey it in order to be saved: faith is expressed by obedience to the Law. In short, if Paul had not shown in Rom 1-4 that salvation came through/by faith and not the Law, the statements in Rom 10 would not be sufficient. Rereading Rom 4 permits understanding why Paul treats the Law, faith, justice, and salvation together and why he associates them with the figure of Abraham.

Before reading and describing the way of faith in Rom 4, a short state of the questions that confronted Paul will allow perceiving the reasons for his positions. It will then be possible to reread Rom 4 and to show not only why the Apostle needs the Scriptures in order to justify his position on the roles of faith and the Law but also why the way in which he reads the Scriptures is extraordinary, unique, and therefore, why its pertinence must be evaluated.

## 1. PAUL'S POSITION AND HIS REASONS

Today we do not always take into account that in the decades that followed the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth it was not obvious how to identify the group of Jesus' disciples. Indeed, a religion was defined first of all by its rites: Jews went to the Temple in Jerusalem to sacrifice and pagans to numerous sacred places. As long as the disciples of Jesus were Jews, they continued to live according to the rhythm of the festivals of their people, joining in the prayers in their synagogues each Sabbath and in the Temple for the major festivals. But the massive adherence of non-Jews to the Gospel complicated things: not being circumcised, the latter could not accompany their Jewish brothers to the Temple, and no longer being pagans, they would not sacrifice to idols. So their gatherings remained private, domestic, and thus were insufficient for locating them within the religious landscape of the time. Not having religious visibility, they were thus not easy to define, or then only as "atheists," without God... And for this reason, they were thought to be suspicious.

Early on, just as serious for non-Jewish believers as the problem of their lack of visibility - *ad extra*, or for "outsiders", as Paul would say, was that of their status - *ad intra*, among Christians. In order to obtain the blessings promised to the Patriarchs, would not these believers have to become a part of the family of Abraham, in other words, the people of Israel? Indeed, to be a descendant of the Patriarch was the equivalent of being a member of the elect people. But for this to be so, it was necessary to be circumcised as God himself categorically orders in the books of the Law (Gen 17:10-14). Thus, it was proposed that believers of non-Jewish origins should be circumcised: what was at stake, it was said, was their salvation. However, Paul

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<sup>3</sup> With a capital letter, this word designates the Mosaic Law to which Jews must be obedient.

was vigorously opposed to this solution because, according to him, the believers converted from paganism had received the promised Holy Spirit and thereby had become sons and daughters of God and thus had no need to become Jews, that is, members of the people of Israel, in order to belong fully to the group of the “elect” and the “saints”, as Paul called them in his letters. This resistance was courageous because, and this is very necessary to say, Paul’s opinion was not in the least shared by the other apostles, who said that the Holy Scriptures expressly said the contrary, and that by not becoming Jews, the new converts were risking being perceived as a new religion, a crime severely repressed at a time when religions were authorized only by their antiquity. Thus, Paul had to show that, far from contradicting the Scriptures, his position did not violate them but that it was actually the only valid one. He does this in two of his letters, Galatians and Romans. Nevertheless, both Paul and his adversaries were aware of the stakes: for the latter, what was at stake was fidelity to the divine Word recorded in the Scriptures, and for Paul, fidelity to the Gospel.

In order to justify his conviction, Paul had to find scriptural proofs that showed that Gen 17:10-14 in no way undermined the soundness of his statements. The difficulty with Gen 17, which was a reliable text for the advocates of circumcision, is that it is God himself who speaks in an assertive and comminatory way; furthermore, there is no other passage from the Torah or the Prophets that declares that it is not necessary to be circumcised in order to be a part of Abraham’s descendants. So which scriptural text could Paul call upon to show that believers who came from paganism did not have to be circumcised in order to be part of the family of Abraham and to obtain salvation?

## 2. GEN 15 AND OBTAINING JUSTICE BY FAITH

Gen 15:6 is clearly the verse from the Scriptures that Paul utilized in order to show that one obtains justification (and by this, salvation) by faith and not the Law. He cites this verse twice, in Gal 3:6 and Rom 4:3.

### *Gal 3:6-14*

The first time Paul has recourse to Gen 15:6 is in Gal 3. As has just been said, the difficulty comes from his position’s seeming to treat disdainfully Gen 17:10-14, in which God himself expressly says to the Patriarch that the uncircumcised must be cut off from the people; in other words, they will be excluded from Abraham’s family and the blessings that were promised to it. Circumcision indeed makes one a member of the people, a descendant of Abraham, and a subject of the Law. To become a subject of the Law is itself essential for obtaining the blessings promised to Abraham - in other words, salvation. On the contrary, exclusion from the people - for being uncircumcised - is identical to being excluded from Abraham’s

descendants. Thus, Paul must show that the non-Jewish believers are blessed in Abraham (cf. vv. 6-9) without having need of undergoing circumcision and becoming subjects of the Law (cf. vv. 10-14). He does this by contrasting faith and Law, showing that, far from leading to blessing, the Law rather brings malediction. I have already done the exegesis of this very difficult passage<sup>4</sup>, and so I will not repeat it here. I only want to recall that independent of its exegetical validity, the scriptural argumentation of Gal 3:6-14 could only offend Jews, even those who were disciples of Christ. Indeed, for them, the Law is the greatest of blessings as the Psalms are pleased to repeat in response to the divine oracles<sup>5</sup>. Thus, to avoid rankling the community in Rome, in which Jews formed a strong minority, Paul in Rom 4 uses the same passage from Gen 15 without making the Law a system associated with malediction.

#### *Rom 4*

One will undoubtedly object that Rom 1-3 more or less reaches the same conclusion: "For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom 3:20, RSV). But in Rom 1-3, it certainly is not declared, as it is in Gal 3:10, "For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" (RSV). Indeed, in this first rhetorical unit of *Romans*, Paul's tour de force is finally to reach the point of showing that all Jews are in the same negative situation as the rest of mankind without indicting the Law and of indicating that his position, far from abolishing it, rather clearly confirms it (Rom 3:31). A tour de force that continues in Rom 4, in which, unlike in Gal 3:12<sup>6</sup>, it is not said that the Law has no connection with faith.

Thus, how is Paul able to show in Rom 4 that only faith without the Law justifies and at the same time confirm the latter? How is he able to show that Gen 15:6 permits a better understanding of Gen 17:10-14 without the semantic unity of the Law disappearing? One is able to grasp this only by following the way in which the chapter unfolds. But before proceeding with the reading, let us briefly recall why Paul had to connect faith and justification. Indeed, by asking the believers that came from paganism to be circumcised, one was indicating to them that, in order to be saved, it was not sufficient to believe in the Gospel but that it was also necessary for them to belong to the descendants of Abraham because, without being members of this family, the eschatological blessings - salvation - could not be obtained. And in order to belong to the descendants of Abraham, it was necessary to be circumcised, in other words, to become a subject of the Law, to obey the latter and to be just - justice being the condition of the blessing. The following diagram illustrates these implications:

<sup>4</sup> J.N. ALETTI, „Galatians 3:10-14. Justification, Faith and Law”, *New Approaches for Interpreting the Letters of Saint Paul* (ed. J.N. ALETTI) (Subsidia Biblica 43; Rome 2012) 237-260.

<sup>5</sup> Deut 4:20; 5:29; 10:13; 11:27; 30:16; and Ps 118/119, *passim*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the Greek: ὁ δὲ νόμος οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ πίστεως (GNT 27<sup>th</sup>).

**circumcision → subject of the Law → obedience → justice → eschatological blessings (salvation)**

Thus, in Rom 1-3 Paul has to show that it is not necessary to become a subject of the Law in order to obtain justice; it remains for him to show that justice is obtained by faith alone, independent of the Law.

*Faith and Justification*<sup>7</sup>

As there is not a passage in the Law that counterbalances Gen 17:10-14 and explicitly declares circumcision useless for obtaining justice, Paul must combine two scriptural texts that have at least one word in common and show that their similarity permits concluding that justification comes by faith alone, without it being necessary to go through the Law. To do this, he uses a rule that began to be utilized at that time, the *gezerah shawah*<sup>8</sup>. The difficulty that this rule raises is that if one declares that all the verses of the Law and the Prophets having one word in common are similar, the Scriptures may say whatever one wants. Over the course of time, it thus became necessary to fix the limits of this hermeneutical rule. I have studied and verified its validity in Rom 4, and I will only refer to this article<sup>9</sup>. What this rule does is allow applying the same law to two different situations, and this is truly what it does in Rom 4 since it allows Paul to apply the principle of gracious divine justification - without the works required by the Law - to two apparently totally different situations, that of the non-Jew and that of the Jew.

The two scriptural passages that Paul relates to one another are Gen 15:6 and Ps 31/32:1-2. What he succeeds in showing is that Abraham (not yet circumcised, and thus, a pagan) and David (subject of the Law, and thus, an Israelite) believed in the word of God and that this belief is what was reckoned to them as justice. Admittedly, the words of Psalm 31/32 speak neither of faith nor of justice, but the Apostle clearly shows that the correspondences between the situations of the Patriarch and the king are real<sup>10</sup>.

The first connection is noted in Rom 4:9-10: faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness while he was still uncircumcised. Thus, what Paul parallels is clear: the state of uncircumcision in Gen 15:6 is the equivalent of the sinful being in Ps

<sup>7</sup> The vocables faith and justice/justification are several times associated in the Pauline letters. Besides Rom 1:17; 3:22,26,28,30; 4:3,5,9; 5:1; 9:30; 10:4,6,10; Gal 2:16; 3:1,6,8,24; Phil 3:9.

<sup>8</sup> One also encounters the *gezerah shawah* in the Gospels, for example in Mark 1:2-3 (two scriptural passages, Mal 3:1 and Is 40:3 that have the Greek word *hodos* in common) and in Mark 12:30-31 (that conjoins Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18). But because the final redaction of Mark is later than that of the proto-Paulines, the first witness of the *gezerah shawah* seems to be in Paul. One finds in his works several uses of this rule: Gal 3:10-14; Rom 4:3,6-8; 9:25-26; 9:27-29 and 9:32-33; 1Cor 9:9-10.

<sup>9</sup> J.N. ALETTI, „Romans 4 and Genesis 17. The Importance of the *Gezerah Shawah*”, *New Approaches for Interpreting the Letters of Saint Paul* (ed. J.N. ALETTI) (Subsidia Biblica 43; Rome 201) 37-60 (especially 38-51).

<sup>10</sup> The five paragraphs that follow are repeated in full from the article „Romans 4 and Genesis 17” cited in the preceding note, 55-57.

31/32. There is no lack of texts that confirm that non-Jews were treated as sinners by the Scriptures, ancient Judaism, and Paul himself. However, the state of physical uncircumcision is not sufficient to qualify someone as a sinner - because Rom 2:25-29 has already recalled, following the prophets, that the non-Jew can have a circumcised heart. But it is an initial connection, which has a corollary for the Jew and which Rom 2:17-29 has already developed, namely that a sinful Jew - in the strong sense, because of having committed iniquities - cannot depend upon his physical circumcision to escape God's just judgment.

This first connection, still insufficient, nevertheless constitutes the backdrop upon which the statements that follow are going to be expressed. The second, between Abraham and David, is that neither one was able to rely upon their good works. If it is assured that the sinner is unable to invoke his good actions before God in order to compensate for his crime, it is more delicate to show this to be true for Abraham since the Judaism of Paul's day thought that the Patriarch had been a friend of God precisely because of his fidelity<sup>11</sup>. Thus, it is necessary to examine the reasons that led Paul to read the verse differently. Without lingering over the first words of Gen 15, which could confirm the Jewish reading, let us maintain that in Gen 15:6 justice is not attributed to a good work or to the integrity of life but only because the Patriarch believed in the word of God. One may object that as an act and a human response to the divine promise the Patriarch's faith is equivalent to a work or could be substituted for one. Such a reading simply ignores that faith consists in totally relying upon the divine word, waiting upon it and it alone. To present faith as work would signify that one could invoke it before God. But a faith that invoked itself, actually relying upon itself and no longer being a total abandonment into the hands of God, would no longer be faith. Several verses later (Rom 4:17 that refers to Gen 17:5) by focusing on the object of Abraham's faith, namely the promise that God would make him the father of numerous nations when he was very old and Sarai was infertile, Paul explains that Abraham's act of faith was not a work: He asked him to believe something humanly unrealizable - for him and for his wife. Relying upon a (divine) word that seems totally impossible, such is the radicality to which the Patriarch's faith was led, a radicality emphasizing that God alone is able to put into effect what He has stated. Thus, Paul has a very good reason to say that Abraham the believer is in the same situation as David the sinner because righteousness was accorded to them without their having done anything whatsoever, without God owing them anything whatsoever - the logic is not that of the Law, where recompense depends upon the observance of the commandments. The contrast between faith and works is not only applied to the two situations, the

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<sup>11</sup> On the reading that ancient Judaism made of the Abraham cycle and of Gen 15:6 in particular, see the recent article of M. KÖCKERT, „Abrahams Glaube in Röm 4 und vorpaulinischen Judentum“, *Der Römerbrief als Vermächtnis der Kirche. Rezeptionsgeschichten aus zwei Jahrtausenden* (ed. C. BREYTENBACH) (Neukirchen - Vluyn 2012) 15-48, that reviews several texts: Neh 9:8; Si 44:19-21; Jub 17:18; 18:6; 21:1-4; 4Q225; 1Mac 2:52; Josephus, *Ant* 1.154-155; Philo, *Abr* 68sq; *Heres* 91.94.

one without the Law (for the non-Jew) and the other under the Law (for the Jew); it touches upon both, Jews and non-Jews, who, because of their sins or their situation, cannot assert their (good) works.

This connection entails another. Abraham's attitude is not the only one capable of being qualified as faith; David's is one as well. To say that the man whose sins are forgiven by God is blessed is to testify to the experience of salvation, to proclaim that one desires it and one awaits it. But the sinner who invokes forgiveness must totally rely upon the word and mercy of God, because he is unable to give himself what he desires.

If physical circumcision is of no help for the justification of the Jewish sinner, it is because in order to be obtained, justification is not necessarily tied to circumcision. Like Abraham, it is necessary to believe in order to obtain it, and one can then see why Gen 15:6 is typical of the ethnic Christians' situation, who, not being circumcised, have believed in the word of the Gospel and have obtained by their faith in this word alone the forgiveness of their sins and justification.

It is clear that Paul has made the connection by showing that the situation in Gen 15:6 can be likened to that of the sinner in Ps 31/32, that of experiencing mercy and thus the divine liberality, of not being able to boast of good works, but of relying solely upon the divine word. The *gezerah shawah* has thus done its work very well, that is in interpreting Gen 15:6 with the help of Ps 31/32.

### 3. WHICH IS THE NORM, GEN 15:6 OR GEN 17:10-14?

But one will object, Gen 15:6 can no longer be the norm for the connection of faith to justification because Gen 17:10-14 changes its modalities. Up until the oracle of Gen 17:10-14, it was undoubtedly possible to obtain justification by faith alone - without the Law - but not later after Gen 17:10-14: from then on circumcision being obligatory in order to belong to Abraham's descendants and in order to obtain the blessings linked to this membership, obtaining justification without the Law was an exception. In other words, Gen 15:6 was valid for Abraham, and for him alone, and only for the period prior to his circumcision.

The objection would be valid if not for the *gezerah shawah*. The latter has indeed shown that the Jew, like the non-Jew, receives justification by faith alone. For if the subject of the Law who has fallen into sin finds himself in a situation identical to that of the uncircumcised and thus must rely solely upon the divine mercy in order to gain justice, then circumcision is not necessary for it to be obtained. Thus, Gen 15:6 remains the model for the experience offered to the ethnic Christians. In other words, the situation created by Gen 15:6 is valid even after Gen 17:10-14.

Another objection would then consist of saying that Gen 17:10-14 changes nothing for major sinners, who like David, have committed adultery and murder



but that it changes everything for those who observe the Law with all their heart and can, in accordance with numerous Psalms, be called just. For them, is not the Law a way of salvation? This objection is no more valid than the preceding one because it forgets the demonstration of Rom 1-3, in which the Scriptures themselves declared that there does not exist a single just man, even in Israel<sup>12</sup>. In short, Gen 17:10-14 does not change the situation created by Gen 15:6 according to which justice comes by faith - without the Law.

If the injunctions of Gen 17:10-14 are not essential in order to obtain justification and the blessings that flow from it, one understands that Paul has proposed his own interpretation of circumcision that he declares to have been instituted "as a seal of the justice received by faith" while uncircumcised (Rom 4:11). Without repeating what can be found developed in all the commentaries, let us only recall that the way in which Rom 4:11-12 describes the role of circumcision comes directly from the *gezerah shawah*. Indeed, if circumcision (being Jewish) is not indispensable for justification, what function can it have? How can it seal a justification obtained while uncircumcised? Actually, it was imposed so that the descendants of Abraham would be constituted as a family established on a relationship of total and complete faith in the God of the promise - the Law being the way in which to respond to the divine word and to live it. Because it is the promise and faith in the promise that constituted the descendants, and, by sealing this unifying link of faith of Abraham's descendants to God, circumcision reflects this promise that precedes it and gives meaning to it, in order to recall that justification was obtained by faith alone and that the promise took on flesh in the same way. Those who have become Jews have thus been constituted as witnesses to a justification without circumcision and to a promise that one day will be extended to the uncircumcised. The least that one is able to say is that this role attributed to circumcision is paradoxical, but it is logically inferred from the *gezerah shawah* that precedes it.

#### 4. THE EFFECTS OF FAITH IN ROM 4

##### *The Dynamic of the Argumentation*

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, one must recall that the biblical texts cited in Rom 3:10-17 do not declare only the pagans as bad and perverse. If in Rom 3:10b-12, it really is a question of the latter, in Rom 3:15-17, on the contrary, Isaiah 59:7-8 (and Isaiah 59 in its entirety) denounce the same perversion in Israel. The two groups that make up humanity are both in the same sinful situation, fundamentally separated from God. Admittedly, one could object that the verses cited from Isaiah are materially pertinent but that they are speaking of the group in its entirety, without aiming at *all* the subjects of the Law. The objection is not valid, to the extent that the surrounding verses, like Is 59:4, themselves also show that corruption has reached everyone.



The function of Rom 4 is not just to show that justification comes by faith alone and that, because of this fact, it is not necessary to become a subject of the Law before obtaining salvation. Only the first part of Rom 4 is concerned with this problem. What follows in the second part is a review of all the implications of Abraham's faith. Before reading vv. 13-23, let us briefly revisit the overall dynamic. The chapter clearly appears to be divided into two parts: (1) Abraham found justice with God by faith without the Law (vv. 1-12), and (2) he received descendants that include Jews as well as non-Jews (vv. 13-23).

Vv. 1-12 are formed by two rhetorical units:

- In vv. 2-8, the relationship between God and Abraham is the only one described: to Abraham's faith is corresponded the justice reckoned by God, with a strong emphasis on its graciousness: it is not because of a work, and thus from an obligation, that the Patriarch has been justified, but by grace, without any obligation on the part of God.

- Vv. 9-12 emphasize the circumstances of the relationship described in vv. 2-8. *When* was Abraham justified? While he was still uncircumcised. And for Paul, the very fact that Abraham had been justified while he was uncircumcised, exclusively for having believed in the divine word, has a normative value: this means that all those who believe, even if they are uncircumcised, are justified like him.

Vv. 13-25 constitute the second part of the scriptural proof. Because if Paul considered Abraham's uncircumcised status to have a normative value for the uncircumcised in order for them to have access to justification, how can faith, and it alone, make those who are uncircumcised sons of Abraham?

- Vv. 13-18 are going to respond to this question in part. If in vv. 2-12 it is the connection between faith and justice that dominates, without knowing *in what* Abraham *believed*, the argumentation now moves toward the object of the believing that is identical to the object of the promise: Abraham will be the father of numerous people, and his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky. Here, Paul is still emphasizing the fact that this promise is in no way tied to the Law: God promises such descendants without imposing conditions ("if you respect my will," etc.); furthermore, it is not a reward offered to the Patriarch for having behaved well ("since you have obeyed my covenant or my Law"). If Abraham became a father, it is solely because he believed in what God graciously promised him. He became a father by faith, and in this way, we ourselves are his descendants by virtue of this same faith.

- Vv. 19-25 emphasize the circumstances of the promise: the advanced age of the Patriarch and the sterility of his wife, Sarai, but also the constancy with which the Patriarch believed in the divine word: everything depended upon it, and this act of faith was all the more fundamental because humanly speaking the promise could not be realized because of the necrosis that struck Abraham and his wife (v. 19). Paul thus arrives at presenting the act of believing in its radicality: first of all because it consists of relying solely upon the divine word and then because it goes to the heart of the believer's existence, in which the present and the future can

literally be born from this same word. It is quite clear that vv. 19-25 constitute the semantic summit of the discourse: indeed, the text does return to the relationship between the believer and his God, but to its structure, not just its effects (justice). What Paul is highlighting is not the believer's effort but the fact that the justice obtained does not come from works and *thus cannot be the cause for boasting*: the work is entirely that of God. Abraham himself, did nothing, because he could not do anything: his old age and Sarai's sterility prohibited him from having the descendants that he so ardently desired. Only God, who gives life, is able to bring to life that which was dead, making it alive and the bearer of life. Human powerlessness and the all-powerful divine are sufficiently highlighted in order that the situation - and not the behavior - of Abraham is emblematic, because it clearly shows that by relying totally upon the divine word, the Patriarch *received* from God himself his own identity as father: he became one because he believed that God would do this for him.

In Rom 4, as I have noted elsewhere, the thought progresses not only in an alternating manner but also chiasmically<sup>13</sup>. Alternation, because, Paul twice establishes connections before pointing out their circumstances:

a = vv. 2-8 the link between faith and justice (but not between works and justice)

b = vv. 9-12 the circumstances of the justification: before the circumcision

a' = vv. 13-18 the link between descendants (the promise) and faith (but not with the Law)

b' = vv. 19-25 the circumstances of the promise: old age and sterility

But the disposition is also chiasmic because the passage begins and ends with the Abraham/God relationship, while in the central units, it is the relationship between Abraham and his descendants that is highlighted:

a = vv. 2-8 Abraham (faith) and God (who reckons as justice)

b = vv. 9-12 Abraham father of all believers, Jews and non-Jews

b' = vv. 13-18 Abraham and his descendants (numerous nations)

a' = vv. 19-25 Abraham (steadfast faith) and God (who gives life)

#### *Faith and the Identity of the Believers*

The second part of Rom 4 is even more interesting for our subject, faith. Indeed, with Abraham, the object of faith is not first of all, or only, an external reality. What Abraham must believe primarily concerns him personally because from it he receives his own identity as father.

When in Gen 15:6, Abraham believes, he receives his true identity as father, and, at the same time, that of his descendants, his children to come. His identity and ours is expressed in the same act of believing. Here is why Paul returns to the beginning, as to a fecundity that precedes us. It is faith that has engendered us, and it is by it that we are what we are: and by "faith" it is indeed necessary for us to

<sup>13</sup> J.N. ALETTI, *Israël et la Loi dans la lettre aux Romains* (Lectio Divina 173; Paris 1998) 88-89.

understand *not only* Abraham's, but also our own, since the act of believing gives us an ascendancy, connects us to a history, that of believers.

Thus, one sees why the Apostle chooses the case of Abraham, father of all believers. If there is one thing that the son/daughter cannot give him/herself, but can only receive, it is the identity of son/daughter. There is nothing to be done to obtain it; it can only be received, that is to say, *be believed that it is so*. But it is also necessary for us to add that what is valid for the daughters and sons - which we are - is true above all for Abraham since he received his identity as father by the Divine Word. The economy of grace or of faith thus acquires its maximum extent as the story of a promise on the way to being accomplished, as a story of an immense family: from the father all the way to his last sons, as many as will be believers! The most beautiful aspect of all is clearly that Abraham's act of faith cannot be the only one: in a certain way, he also receives his identity as father from believers, from all those who "as numerous as the stars in the heavens" (Gen 15:5) will believe as he. Thus, our act of believing confirms Abraham's identity as father of believers, in short, the fecundity of his (of each) act of faith.

Rom 4:13-25 also magnificently confirms Paul's statements at the end of the preceding chapter, namely, that Abraham's paternity is like his faith: neither one is a work since it is by believing in the divine promise that Abraham became a father. And so it is that Isaac is the child of the promise and of faith and not primarily the result of a natural union, that of a man and a woman. Because Abraham truly received his descendants from the very word of God.

#### *Promise and Faith*

The promise and faith both have the same object since faith consists in accepting and receiving the object of the promise. And the object of the latter, namely, to have descendants, has in Rom 4 its maximum extent, quantitatively and temporally. Quantitatively, because it is not a question of only a small family but of an immense number of descendants: "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then he said to him, 'So shall your descendants be.'" (Gen 15:5, RSV). Temporally, for it will take many centuries to attain such a number. In giving to Abraham his identity as father, God is also promising him a long history.

The text of Gen 15 chosen by Paul in order to confirm his position has another advantage. Unlike Gen 17:14, the divine promise of Gen 15:5 indeed excludes no one. Having become the father of believers before being circumcised, Abraham has, for this reason, become the father of uncircumcised believers as well. His descendants are not above all, or only, ethnic. Circumcised and uncircumcised, Jews and non-Jews, all can become his descendants provided they believe.

Having emphasized the fact that Abraham was uncircumcised at the time of the promise and his response of faith, one could think that Paul would then have declared the Jewish identity useless. A verse like Rom 4:12, which has elsewhere drawn a lot of ink because of its ambiguous construction, on the contrary, gives to the Jews a more positive role, that of bearing witness in their flesh - by circumcision - to the faith of an Abraham not yet circumcised, of a faith reckoned by God

as justice. The Jews also bear witness to what constitutes for Paul an essential trait of the Gospel, namely, justification by faith alone. In short, if one believes the affirmations of Rom 4, the Jews are not as far from the Gospel as one would think!

Lastly, Abraham's response to the promise shows that life comes by faith. Not knowing when or how this promise of an enormous number of descendants would be realized, Abraham totally relied upon a (divine) word that everything human seemed to contradict. By believing that life could occur where once there was only sterility, Abraham was able to experience that faith alone is truly fecund.

## CONCLUSION

If, unlike Rom 10, Rom 4 does not describe the process that goes from the announcement of the Gospel to faith in it, if the faith of Abraham in Rom 4 is not Christological, it is none the less emblematic of what is and must be every attitude of faith. Paul could not have found a better support for his argumentation. But it is not only for Paul's argumentation that the divine promise and Abraham's response of faith are decisive. Our own faith is also reinforced: today, our Church undoubtedly better understands that it was born of faith and that it can only live from faith, without relying on its own works.

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