

## **Interpreting Romans 4:1-8:**

### **The Theological and Exegetical Contribution of Psalm 32**

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#### **Introduction**

When we consider the meaning of Rom 4:1-8, it is evident that the OT plays a vital role. Paul explicitly cites two OT texts (Gen 15:6 and Ps 32:1-2) in this paragraph. Furthermore, two of the most prominent characters in the OT, Abraham and David, are the subject of discussion. I am assuming Willem VanGemeren will concentrate on explaining the meaning of Psalm 32 in its OT context. What I want to argue in this paper is that the key to understanding the use of Psalm 32 in Romans 4 is discerning the flow of the argument in Romans 4 itself. Paul cites Psalm 32 in order *to confirm and substantiate* his thesis in vv. 1-5. What is most important, then, in unlocking the contribution of Psalm 32 in Romans 4, then, is the surrounding context—in particular the first five verses of the chapter. Hence, I will spend most of my time tracing the argument in Rom 4:1-5 before making some comments at the end about the theological significance of Psalm 32. Before launching into an interpretation of the passage, a few preliminary comments about the impact of the OT and Jewish tradition will be offered.

First, the basic meaning of the text could be grasped by those who had never read the OT. I take it that Paul's letter was read orally to the saints in Rome, and that the main gist of what he wanted to say was comprehensible on the first reading. Indeed, some of those listening likely had a very general knowledge of Abraham and David, the kind of

vague knowledge an ordinary church member has today. Their lack of expertise did not prevent them from understanding the text, for Paul included in his argument enough information for them to understand what he intended to say. I am skeptical, therefore, about any interpretation that suggests that subtle allusions to the OT or Jewish tradition are the key to the meaning of the text. The argument of the verses themselves is the primary way of determining their meaning. Paul was not writing to scholars who carefully researched every intertextual echo but to ordinary people, and his desire was to communicate with them clearly.

Second, we need to remind ourselves that the readers in Rome were likely not experts in the Jewish traditions about Abraham and David. Many of them probably had no access to these traditions at all. They did not hear the letter read and think, "Oh, Paul is countering Sirach at this point." And, "Now he is taking a shot at what is said about Abraham in Jubilees."

Third, I am not arguing that acquaintance with the OT or Jewish traditions about Abraham is worthless. We learn from such traditions what was in the air about Abraham during Paul's day. Moreover, some believers in Rome knew the OT very well, and they also knew, at least from oral tradition, various stories that circulated about Abraham in the interpretive tradition. It seems that Romans is addressed to both Jewish and Gentile believers, and many of the Gentile believers may have been God-fearers. Hence, some believers in Rome may have recognized where Paul agreed with or diverged from Jewish tradition. Some of those who heard the letter had a richer and deeper appreciation because of their acquaintance with the OT and Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, such knowledge did not grant them a *different* understanding of what Paul wrote. His meaning

was accessible to all, for his argument does not depend on allusions available only to the *cognoscenti*. A fuller understanding of the implications of the text does not amount to a different understanding of the meaning of the text.

Finally, Paul as a student of Gamaliel was a student of both the OT and Jewish traditions. Romans represents in part his interaction with his Jewish exegetical tradition. Indeed, Romans likely represents the fruit of Paul's exegesis after years of debating with Jewish opponents. He has honed his scriptural arguments after many years of debate, and they represent a very close reading of the OT. Furthermore, we may be able to glean from Jewish traditions what was controversial in Paul's era since they *may* help us understand some of the issues Paul deals with. Hence, a grasp of the OT and Jewish tradition may increase our comprehension of Paul's argument. Such background study may provide a sharper profile of what is stated in the text. Still, we should be suspicious if such tradition becomes the key to unlock the meaning of the text, for Paul himself communicates clearly in the line of argument what he wishes to say.

### **Broader Context**

Paul has argued in Rom 1:18-3:20 that all people, both Jews and Gentiles, are sinners. Hence, the only way one can be right with God is through the atoning work of Jesus Christ (3:21-26). In Rom 3:27-31 we learn that righteousness is by faith instead of by works of law. Paul appeals to the example of Abraham in Romans 4 to substantiate two themes from Rom 3:27-30. First, righteousness is by faith alone. Second, this righteousness by faith is for all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles. If Abraham as the fountainhead of the Jewish people was justified by faith, then it follows that all people everywhere are justified in the same way.

It is not difficult to see why Paul introduces Abraham here. We have already noted that the Jewish people can be traced back to Abraham. Paul likely introduced Abraham because the latter's relationship with Yahweh as the first Jewish believer is paradigmatic for all who follow him. A citation from Psalm 32 is also introduced in vv. 6-8. But it is clear that the reference to Psalm 32 serves as confirmatory evidence. Paul immediately returns to Abraham in v. 9 and for the remainder of the chapter. The focus is on Abraham as the initial person who received God's promise and from whom the Jewish people derive their ancestry.

The fundamental OT text for Paul's argument in Rom 4:1-8 and for understanding the citation of Psalm 32 is Gen 15:6 which is cited in v. 3. The importance of Gen 15:6 in Pauline theology is also apparent from the argument in Gal 3:6-9 where Gen 15:6 is again the key proof text in the paragraph. Paul's selection of Gen 15:6 is instructive when contrasted with Jewish tradition.

There is not space to elaborate here, but Jewish tradition emphasizes Abraham's obedience, and by comparison Abraham's trust in God's promises does not receive much attention.<sup>1</sup> Only one example will be given to illustrate the point being made. First Maccabees 2:52 says, "Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?" (NRSV, Ἀβραάμ οὐχὶ ἐν πειρασμῷ εὐρέθη πιστός καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην). Clearly the author of 1 Maccabees is thinking of the sacrifice of Isaac, and Abraham's faithful obedience in doing what God commanded. Abraham was counted as righteous before God because of his faithful obedience when tested.

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<sup>1</sup> For a very helpful survey of traditions about Abraham, see G. Walter Hansen, *Abraham in Galatians: Epistolary and Rhetorical Contexts* (JSNTSup 29; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989) 175-99.

As noted in the introduction the ordinary reader was able to grasp the Pauline meaning without knowing either the OT or Jewish traditional interpretations. On the other hand, the distinctiveness of Paul's use of the OT shines brighter against the backdrop of Jewish traditions. In Jewish tradition the emphasis is placed on Abraham's obedience and faithfulness when tested, to his devotion to God's commands. By contrast Paul brings to the forefront Abraham's trust in God and stresses that Abraham was a sinner who failed to please God. The distinctiveness of the Pauline argument over against Jewish tradition suggests that we have an example in which Paul's previous exegetical debates with Jews and Jewish Christians come to the surface.

### **Interpretation of Romans 4:1-5**

I translate v. 1 as follows, "What shall we say, then, that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?" The emphasis in the verse is on the word "found" (εὕρηκέναι). The term is a judicial one, asking what Abraham has found before God as his judge.<sup>2</sup> Chapter 3 concluded with the truth that all people, both Jews and Gentiles, are righteous by faith. Paul introduces Abraham in chapter four, the forefather of the Jewish people, to support the truth that the universal blessing is received by faith.

Why does Paul say that that Abraham was "our forefather *according to the flesh*"? He emphasizes that Abraham was the physical progenitor of the Jewish people because he wants to stress that the ethnic founder of the Jewish people was right with God by faith alone. Hays translates the verse differently with the question, "Have we found

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<sup>2</sup> The judicial flavor of εὕρηκέναι is attested elsewhere (Exod 22:8; Deut 22:28; Ezra 10:18), and the term is used to depict one's relationship before God (Sir 44:17,20; Dan 5:27 Theodotion; cf. Acts 5:39; 24:5; 1 Cor 4:2; 15:15; Gal 2:17; Phil 3:9; 1 Pet 1:7; Rev 5:4).

Abraham (to be) our forefather according to the flesh?"<sup>3</sup> Syntactically, Hays's exegesis is questionable. First, if Hays were correct, we would expect the accusative ἡμᾶς as the subject of the infinitive εὐρηκέναι. Instead, "Abraham" is the natural subject of the infinitive in context. Second, Hays's proposal would be more persuasive if the words "according to the flesh" were placed next to the infinitive "found." But the phrase "according to the flesh" immediately follows the words "our forefather," suggesting that Paul speaks of Abraham as "our forefather according to the flesh." Third, if Paul poses the question whether we should consider Abraham as a physical progenitor, we would expect Paul's typical μὴ γένοιτο as a decisive repudiation of any such idea.<sup>4</sup> The verses that follow are too ambiguous if they constitute an answer to the question posed by Hays. Finally, verses 2-8 do not answer a question about Abraham's paternity but his righteousness. Paul is asking about what Abraham *has found* before God, not whether his paternity is fleshly or spiritual.

In v. 2 Paul begins to ask the question raised in v. 1. In terms of the structure of the argument, 2a functions as the antithesis to v. 3 where Gen 15:6 is cited. We have a simple condition in v. 2. "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has a reason for boasting." The verb "justified" (ἐδικαιώθη) is forensic here, supporting the notion that "found" in v. 1 is a judicial term. Paul asks if Abraham was declared to be in the right before God by works. We should note that he uses the term ἔργα, and not "works of law." Paul is not, then, contrary to the "new perspective," thinking of the boundary markers separating Jews from Gentiles. In Gal 3:15-18 he separates Abraham from the

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<sup>3</sup> Richard B. Hays, "'Have We Found Abraham to Be Our Forefather according to the Flesh?' A Reconsideration of Rom 4:1," *NovT* 27 (1985): 81.

<sup>4</sup> Glenn N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1-4* (JSNTSup 39; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990) 148.

era of the law (cf. also Rom 5:12-14). The word "works" is a comprehensive term, signifying the deeds people do, as in Eph 2:8-9. I would rephrase the condition as follows. "If Abraham was right before God by what he did, then he has a reason to boast." Paul does not reject boasting here. He genuinely believes that Abraham's boasting would be legitimate if he did the mandated works.<sup>5</sup>

Paul, however, denies that Abraham has a reason to boast before God. A crucial question surfaces here. Why is it that Abraham cannot boast before God? The most natural way to read the verse, in my judgment, is that he could not boast because he did not do the required works. In other words, Abraham could not boast before God because he was a sinner, because he too had fallen short of God's glory by sinning (cf. Rom 3:23). It is completely off the mark to say that Abraham's works were significant enough to warrant boasting before human beings.<sup>6</sup> When Paul refers to justification in v. 2, he is certainly thinking of what renders a person right *before God*—not what counts in the eyes of human beings.<sup>7</sup>

It is precisely at this point in the argument that Gen 15:6 provides the answer to the question posed in v. 1. Abraham did not stand in the right before God by working (since he was a sinner). Abraham's relationship to God is to be discerned in the scriptures, and Gen 15:6 pronounces the word that Abraham was right before God by his faith, by his trust in God. The word "reckon" or "count" (ἐλογίσθη) signifies that

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<sup>5</sup> Rightly Jan Lambrecht, "Why Is Boasting Excluded? A Note on Rom 3,27 and 4,2," *ETL* 61 (1985): 366-68.

<sup>6</sup> Contra Günter Klein, "Sündenverständnis und theologia cruce bei Paulus," in *Theologia Crucis—Signum Crucis: Festschrift für Erich Dinkler*, ed. C. Andresen and G. Klein (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1979) 276-77; Willaim Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902) 100; Hendrikus Boers, *Theology out of the Ghetto: A New Testament Exegetical Study concerning Religious Exclusiveness* (Leiden: Brill, 1971) 86.

<sup>7</sup> Rightly Douglas J. Moo, *Romans 1-8* (WEC; Chicago: Moody, 1991) 264.

righteousness was not inherent to Abraham.<sup>8</sup> Righteousness was extrinsic to him and counted as his because he believed. In that sense righteousness was imputed to him. It follows, then, that Abraham was unrighteous, and needed an alien righteousness from God.

Paul features the priority of faith in Abraham's life. Abraham was right before God by believing not by doing, by trusting not by working. When we reflect upon the context of Genesis 15, it is evident that Paul is faithful to the original intention of the text. Abraham is distressed because he has no son, and his slave is destined to become his heir. God promises Abraham, however, that he will have a son who will inherit the blessing. He summons Abraham to count the stars, saying that if he can do so, then he will be able to calculate the number of his heirs. Abraham could do nothing to bring such a promise to realization. And at his age and station in life the promise seemed more than slightly ridiculous. Still, Abraham trusted the word and power of God. He was considered to be right before God, not because of the great things he had done *for* God, but because he trusted that God would do great things *for him*. Such a theme fits with the rest of the chapter where God makes a covenant with Abraham. In a typical covenantal ceremony the animals are cut in half (cf. Jer 34:18-19). Unlike most covenantal ceremonies, however, Abraham and God do not both walk through the divided animals. God alone passed through the pieces, signifying that the fulfillment of the covenant was dependent upon him alone, that the covenant would be fulfilled entirely by the grace of God.

We now come to vv. 4-5 in the argument, and they are crucial indeed. We should remind ourselves of the structure of the text at this juncture. Verse 1 asks a question that

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<sup>8</sup> So Herman N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 177; Seybold, *TDOT*, 5:241-44; Moo, *Romans*, 265.



is answered in vv. 2-3. Verse 2 contains the negative answer: Abraham was not justified by his works. Verse 3, on the other hand, has the positive answer: Abraham was counted as right in God's sight, per Gen 15:6, because he trusted God's word. As we approach vv. 4-5, we must see that they explicate and unpack what we see in vv. 2-3. Verse 4 restates and expands what we find in v. 2, whereas v. 5 articulates further v. 3. This is another way of saying that vv. 4-5 also stand in a negative-positive relation to one another. To put it still another way, the meaning of vv. 2-3 is verified by what Paul says in vv. 4-5.

We can translate v. 4, "Now to the one who works wages are not counted as gift but as a debt." The illustration comes from everyday life where employees receive wages for their labor. Those who labor do not view their salary as a gift of grace but something they deserve. What must be seen is that v. 4 functions as a commentary on v. 2. If Abraham did the works enjoined by God, then righteousness would not be a gift but a payment. If Abraham did the requisite works, his righteous status before God would be earned or merited. The illustration used here rules out any notion that in v. 2 Paul refers to Abraham's works in the sight of human beings. Paul clarifies here that if Abraham's obedience was sufficient, then he would have merited God's commendation and a right-standing with him just as a worker merits pay from an employer. Another connection with v. 2 must be noted. Those who do such good works deserve praise and commendation. They are entitled to boast. Paul does not criticize boasting or payment per se here. Both are valid if the works demanded are carried out. But the point of Rom 4:1-8 (and 1:18-3:20 for that matter) is that no one does what God demands. All fail to do his will.

Verse 5 functions as the contrast to v. 4, and also unpacks Gen 15:6 which is cited in v. 3. "But to the one who does not work, but believes on him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." That Paul explicates Gen 15:6 is obvious from the last phrase of the verse, where the content of Gen 15:6 is reiterated. What is particularly important, however, is the first part of the verse. The one who is right with God is not the one who works but the one who believes in the God who justifies the ungodly. A clear polarity between working for God and believing in God is established, the very polarity we previously argued for in vv. 2-3. Paul is remarkably emphatic. It is *not* those who work who are counted as right before God *but* those who trust in God, who place their faith and hope in the crucified and risen Christ who died for their sins and was raised for their justification (Rom 4:25).

One of the most important features of this verse is the comment that God "justifies the ungodly." Notice that Paul does not suggest that Abraham was a "godly" person who did impressive works before human beings. We need to remember that Abraham is introduced here as a paradigmatic figure in Romans 4. Paul would hardly say that God typically justifies the ungodly, but Abraham did not belong in that category. Abraham's role as an exemplar would be severely undermined on such a reading. Furthermore, Paul, as a person who knew the OT scriptures very well, probably had another OT text in mind. We read the following in Josh 24:14-15,

Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

Joshua does not conceive of Abraham as a person who feared the Lord before God called him out of Ur of the Chaldees. Abraham served other gods beyond the river Euphrates. Hence, the problem with Abraham, if we return to v. 2, is that he lacked the necessary good works to be right in God's sight. He was an ungodly person, a worshipper of other gods, and hence he desperately needed God's righteousness. Let me return to a point made in my introductory comments. It is likely that most of those hearing the letter read were unfamiliar with Joshua 24. Even those tutored in the OT scriptures may have missed the allusion. I would argue that the interpretation presented here stands whether or not any allusion to Joshua 24 was detected. The argument of Romans 4 itself implies that Abraham was ungodly. The allusion to the OT, then, does not establish the interpretation presented, but simply confirms the interpretation already favored by the context.

At this point it is also helpful to see how Psalm 32 confirms that Abraham was justified as an ungodly person. Paul introduces in v. 6 a citation from Psalm 32:1-2 (Psalm 31 in the LXX) supporting the theme that righteousness is reckoned apart from works. Paul limits his quotation to vv. 1-2, but if we continue reading in the Psalm on to vv. 3-5, it is clear that David includes himself in those who have been forgiven. Even if the original readers of Romans were unaware of the larger context of the Psalm and did not know that David's words in Psalm 32:1-2 also applied to himself, the main point of the citation of the Psalm does not change. From vv. 1-2 alone it is clear that God grants his forgiveness to sinners. We have strong evidence from the quotation of Psalm 32, then, that Paul was convinced that Abraham was a sinner who needed forgiveness, for Paul would scarcely argue that Abraham did *good* works in the sight of human beings,

and follow it up with a Psalm where David failed to do so. No, both Abraham and David were ungodly sinners in desperate need of forgiveness.

It is instructive to remind ourselves how remarkably Paul diverges from Jewish tradition at this point. Abraham is consistently held up as an example of virtue in second temple literature, but Paul identifies him as ungodly. Jewish tradition typically focuses on Abraham's obedience and faithfulness, but Paul highlights his faith and trust in God. Even when considering Abraham's perseverance, Paul places the emphasis on Abraham's faith and trust in God (Rom 4:17-22). The basis of a right-standing with God is not good works since all fall short, but faith in the God who justifies the ungodly.

At this juncture, we inevitably think of James, for he seems to side with the emphasis on works that we find in Jewish tradition. We hardly have the space and time here to resolve the difficulty that emerges between Paul and James, but we can observe that the works that justify in James flow from faith. They are evidence of a genuine faith (cf. Heb 11:8-19). It is possible, of course, that the Jewish traditions relative to Abraham should be interpreted similarly. But the lack of emphasis on faith and trust in God in these traditions makes one wonder if a synergism intervenes that is neither in James or Paul.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Confirmatory Argument from Psalm 32**

In verses 6-8 Paul turns to David, and a citation from Psalm 32 to confirm his argument. The words "just as" (καθάπερ) demonstrate that Paul does not launch off onto a new subject. Hence, Psalm 32 is not the decisive OT text in Rom 4:1-8, and understanding the preceding verses is crucial in determining the function of Psalm 32 in the argument. The quotation from Psalm 32 may be an example of appealing to two

witnesses, i.e., Abraham and David (or two scriptural texts—Gen 15:6 and Ps 32:1-2) to confirm his argument. In this instance Paul cites the OT exactly as it appears in the LXX. Genesis 15:6 continues to be the foundational text for Paul's argument, for he introduces the quotation of Psalm 32 with the words, "God counts righteousness apart from works." The link word between Gen 15:6 and Psalm 32 is the term λογίζεται. But we ought not to think that Paul merely selects the Psalm because of the linking term. The theology enunciated in Psalm 32 coheres with what Paul has argued relative to Abraham.

Paul also uses the terms δικαιοσύνη and ἔργα in v. 6 to introduce the Psalm, and hence we are given a window into Paul's interpretation of the Psalm before he even quotes it. He understands the Psalm as supporting justification apart from works. Paul continues to prosecute the theme that right standing with God is an alien righteousness, a righteousness not attained by works but reckoned by God apart from works. Furthermore, the introductory words of v. 6 describe righteousness as a blessing (μακαρισμὸν). Thereby the gracious and undeserved character of justification is underscored. A link word is established with the OT citation from Psalm 32 that begins with the word "blessed" (μακάριοι). The citation of the OT in Rom 4:7-8 functions as an example of Hebrew parallelism where all three lines affirm basically the same point. The lawless acts of sinners are forgiven. Another way of expressing the same truth is to say that their sins are covered over (ἐπεκαλύφθησαν), i.e., they are forgotten. Finally, the Lord does not count their sins against them.

At least three observations should be made from the use of Psalm 32. First, the gracious character of justification is emphasized. We saw in v. 5 that God justifies the

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<sup>9</sup> Davies, *Faith and Obedience*, 155-58.

ungodly. In v. 6 "God" is the subject of the verb "reckon." The one who counts the ungodly as righteous is God himself. Implicit in Gen 15:6 is the notion that God is the one who counts faith as righteousness. In other words, ἐλογίσθη in v. 3 is a divine passive. Paul makes the connection explicit in v. 6. Being counted as righteous is an undeserved "blessing" from God that is "apart from works."

Second, the quotation from Psalm 32 assists us in defining the term "righteousness" in this paragraph. The words "just as" (καθάπερ) link very closely vv. 6-8 to vv. 1-5. It follows, then, that the "forgiveness" of David's sins is another way of describing "righteousness." The two terms are synonyms in this context. Paul does not speak of forgiveness of sins often (cf. Eph 1:7; Col 1:14). We have exegetical warrant here for saying that forgiveness of sins is another way of speaking of justification. If we adhere only to this context in defining righteousness, we can say that those who are justified stand in a right relation to God. And what means to be righteous before God is to have received forgiveness of sins. Hence, justification in this context does not refer to God's transforming power or an infusion of grace; it refers to the declaration that those who trust in Christ are forgiven of their sins, that they are in a right relation with God.

The doctrine of imputation has been the subject of some discussion recently among Evangelicals.<sup>10</sup> What is needed is an analysis of the matter that is conversant with biblical theology and the historical and systematic lineaments of the doctrine.<sup>11</sup> Some have tried to argue that "righteousness" in vv. 3 and 5 refers to positive righteousness,

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<sup>10</sup> See e.g., Robert H. Gundry, "Why I Didn't Endorse 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration'. . . even though I wasn't asked to," *Books & Culture* (January/February 2001) ; Thomas Oden's response to Gundry, "A Calm Answer to a Critique of 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,'" and Gundry's reply, "On Oden's 'Answer'" both appear in, *Books & Culture* (March/April 2001) 1-12, 39 and 14-15, 39 respectively. See now John Piper, "Is the Imputation of Christ's Righteousness a Biblical Reality?: A Response to Robert Gundry," Crossway, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> See the forthcoming dissertation by Brian Vickers at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

the active obedience of Christ being imputed to us. On the other hand, they maintain that "forgiveness" in vv. 6-8 refers to the passive obedience of Christ imputed to us. Such a distinction will not wash exegetically here. Paul does not attempt to carve out a distinction between "righteousness" and "forgiveness" in this paragraph. The forgiveness of sins in vv. 6-8 explicates what righteousness means in vv. 1-5. Neither the Roman hearer of the text, nor those who reread the letter, would have considered distinguishing righteousness from forgiveness. I would suggest that this is an instance in which systematic categories are imposed upon the text. When we think of imputation here, we should think of it as a whole. In other words, all of what is imputed to us in Christ is ours when we are declared righteous. That is to say, when we are forgiven of our sins we receive all the righteousness God imputes to us.

Finally, the use of the term "works" in v. 6 demonstrates the weakness of the new perspective and other attempts to redefine the meaning of the term ἔργα. The inadequacy of works in vv. 7-8 is due to sin in general: God forgives lawless deeds; he covers over evil; and he does not count sins against those who trust in him. No evidence exists that particular sins like excluding Gentiles from the people of God, or forcing the boundary markers of Judaism upon such Gentiles are in view. If Paul thinks of David himself, it is clear that the latter's sin did not consist of the exclusion of the Gentiles. Paul is almost certainly thinking here of David's moral failures, particularly his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah.<sup>12</sup>

Nor should we define "works" as "evil deeds" simply because Psalm 32 goes on to mention the lawless deeds and sins of those needing forgiveness. If we plug in the

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<sup>12</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, trans. R. MacKenzie, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Calvin's Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 85-86.

words "evil actions" for the use of the word "works" for both nominal and verbal forms, we shall see that the gloss does not work. It does not make sense to say, "If Abraham was righteous by *evil deeds*, he has a reason to boast" (v. 2). Nor could Paul be saying in v. 4, "Now to the one *who does evil deeds* wages are not counted according to grace but according to debt." The absurdity of such a reading is evident as well in v. 5, "Now to the one *who does not do evil deeds* but believes on the one who justifies the ungodly." Hence, v. 6 cannot mean "God counts us as righteous apart from our *evil deeds*." No, the term ἔργα refers to works in general, to all the things that Abraham and David did, whether or good and bad. And Paul's argument is that such works when considered as a whole do not justify because *some of them* are evil, and God demands perfect obedience. Nor is David considered righteous because he trusted God and obeyed him "most of the time." His sins demonstrated that his only hope on the day of judgment was God's alien righteousness.

### **Conclusion**

Psalm 32 is introduced into the argument in Romans 4:1-8 to confirm what Paul teaches about Abraham in vv. 1-5. It functions as a second witness substantiating the claim that righteousness is a gift of grace given apart from works. The psalm also verifies that the word ἔργα is a general term that embraces all the works or deeds a person does. Finally, the Psalm confirms that righteousness cannot be obtained by works since human beings fail to keep God's commands. Paul does not use Psalm 32 to support the notion that one must believe to be right with God. The centrality of faith, however, is clear from his exposition of the life of Abraham in the rest of chapter 4. Moreover, he assumes that Psalm 32 supports righteousness by faith, for there are only two options—



righteousness by works or righteousness by faith. David testifies that sin eliminates the possibility of the former, and hence the only possibility left is the latter. The only hope for right standing with God is an alien righteousness, a righteousness given by God, a righteousness that is reckoned apart from works, a righteousness that is based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Rom 4:25).

Did Paul cite the Psalm in accord with its original context? My primary aim in this paper has not been to explore that question, but how Psalm 32 fits with Paul's argument in Romans 4:1-8, regardless of how the Psalm functions in its original context. I would suggest, however, that Paul's use of the Psalm fits with its original meaning. When we examine the Psalm as a whole, we see that even David needed God's forgiveness to stand in a right relation with God. David too was a sinner who fell short of the glory of God. What it means to be "godly" (v. 6) and "righteous" (v. 11) is to trust in Lord for forgiveness and to acknowledge our sin before the Lord (v. 5). Those who are wise are not stubborn like the horse or mule (vv. 8-9). They freely acknowledge their sin and are assured of his forgiveness (v. 5). In context the prayer that is to be offered to God in a time when he will be found is a prayer for forgiveness (v. 6). Those who are wicked experience sorrow because they are stubborn and refuse to confess their sins to God, but those who trust in the Lord confess their sins before him and experience his covenantal love (v. 10).