

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF ABRAHAM
AND THE PLACE OF JAMES WITHIN THAT CONTEXT.

Marion L. Soards.

Abraham appears in the NT more frequently than any OT figure except Moses. Moulton and Geden list seventy-two occurrences of the name Abraham in the NT. Some texts seem to be more worthy of attention than others. This discrimination among texts is the result of the observation that in certain cases the name Abraham either (1) is employed in a polemical context or is used for an apologetic purpose, or (2) attention is focused on Abraham as an example from which some theological point is derived or argued. For the purpose of this study we will give attention to Jas 2: 18-24 as one of a selection of NT texts that use Abraham for a polemical, apologetic, or archetypal intent.

A Probe toward Understanding James' Interpretation of Abraham (4:18-24).

In attempting to understand how and why James interprets Abraham as he does and in attempting to reconstruct the historical context in which James expounded his explanation, it is helpful to answer two sets of questions.

- (1) Does James' interpretation of Abraham display clear affinities to either Jewish or Christian exegesis?
- (2) Does James seem to know Paul, and does his interpretation of Abraham indicate an anti-Paul or anti-Pauline bias?

An exegetical affinity?

When we compare James' interpretation of Abraham with extra-NT literature in which Abraham is mentioned, a marked likeness to Jewish exegesis becomes evident. This similarity between James and Jewish interpretation of Abraham is particularly obvious in two shared tendencies. The first tendency is that of interpreting Gen 15:6 in direct relation to Genesis 22, the offering of Isaac (the Akedah). A second tendency is the inclination to refer to Abraham as the "friend of God."

In the OT, Neh 9:7-8 reflects the early disposition to understand God's making a covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:5) and the reckoning of Abraham as righteous (Gen 15:6) as a result of God finding Abraham's

heart faithful. Further, both Isa 41:8 and 2 Chr 20:7 offer canonical instances of references to Abraham as God's friend.

The Apocrypha and pseudepigraphical writings continue and expand the tendency to interpret Gen 15:6 from the perspective of Genesis 22. In the Apocrypha, 1 Macc 2:52 Sir 44:19-22 (especially vv 20-21), and Pr Azar 12 indicate clearly that it was because Abraham was found faithful when he was tested that it was reckoned unto him as righteousness. A theme of Jubilees (18:15-16; 19:9; 23:10; and 24:11) is that Abraham was found faithful and then recorded on the heavenly tablets as God's friend because he was perfect and well-pleasing in righteousness during his whole life. The Damascus Document (CD 3:2-3) records that Abraham was God's friend because he kept the commandments.

Rabbinic literature amplifies these tendencies that are displayed in both James and earlier Jewish literature. Much of this literature comes from many centuries after the NT, but the frequency of these motifs from the second century to the Middle Ages raises the likelihood that first century Jews would have had similar attitudes toward Abraham. M. Abot 5:3 says, "With ten temptations was Abraham our father tempted, and he stood steadfast in them all, to show how great was the love (of God) of Abraham our father." The legendary ten temptations of Abraham usually have the Akedah as the final and greatest test and often the Akedah alone is named as a code for the ten tests by which Abraham was proven righteous. M. Qidd. 4:14 and b. Meg. 11a both imply this same line of thought. Gen. Rab. 55 argues that the ten tests of Abraham show Abraham's righteousness, since only the righteous are tested; and Gen. Rab. 56 says of Abraham's righteousness that if no merit has stood in Abraham's favour (he having been tested so thoroughly), then no creature has value before God. Exod. Rab. 23, in discussing the singing of the Song by the Sea, claims that the singing was made possible through the merit of Abraham: It was because of Abraham's faith in God that Israel was privileged to recite the Song by the Sea. In all of these texts, there is the idea of a righteousness proven to be possessed by Abraham, a righteousness that has a

meritoriousness that brings about subsequent benefits. This same line of thought is found in Mek.Exod.14:15, where the merit of Abraham's deed (the Akedah) results in the splitting of the sea for the Israelites. Further, Mek.Exod.14:31 indicates that Abraham was given the inheritance of Israel as a reward for his faith. The rabbinic literature is equally rich in amplification of the concept of Abraham as God's friend. The existence of this concept is interesting in itself, since in the Genesis account Abraham is not designated a friend [יֵהוָה or φίλος] but a fearer [יִרְאֵהוּ or φοβέσθαι] of God.² As we saw, the OT shows the origin of this concept, and the pseudepigraphical writings perpetuate the designation. It is, however, the rabbinic writings that not only preserve the title but labour to explain the appellation. M. Abot 5:3 and certain Baraitot(y. Ber. ix.14b; y.Sota v.20c) ground the motivation of Abraham's faithfulness through testing (the Akedah?) in his love for God. Other documents portray God's friendship toward Abraham. Gen.Rab. 61 depicts Abraham as God's close friend. Mek. Exod. 14:15 implies God's friendship toward Abraham in accounting for the splitting of the sea as a result of Abraham's merit before God. B. Sota 31a reasons, however, that fearing God with Abraham indicates motivation from love. In relation to the idea of Abraham as a God-fearer (as in Gen 22:12), this text cites Isa 41:8 ("the seed of Abraham who loved me") and then reasons that the one who acts from love is greater than the one who acts from fear-- the merit of love being twice as great as the merit of fear.

In other Jewish literature, both of the distinct tendencies found in James are evident. Gen 15:6 is interpreted in relation to Genesis 22 by Josephus (Ant.18.1 223 and 1.8.4. 233, 234) and Philo (On the Unchangeableness of God 1 4, and Pseudo-Philo (Bib.Ant.18.5). Abraham appears as a "friend of God" in Philo (On Sobriety 11 55-56 and On Abraham 15 71), the Apocalypse of Abraham (9.6), and the Testament of Abraham (1 in the long and 4 in the short version).

In extra-NT early Christian literature 1 Clem. 31:2 offers a different pattern of thought from the line of reasoning that interprets Abraham's righteousness as a result of his faithfulness in testing. "For what reason

was Father Abraham blessed? Was it not because he wrought righteousness and truth through faith?" In two places (Against Heresies 5:3 and 7:2) Irenaeus articulates a Pauline understanding of Abraham. Abraham's faith (both a commitment to monotheism and a confidence that God would multiply his seed) was imputed to him for righteousness.

With regard to the notion that Abraham was a "friend of God," 1 Clement twice gives that title to Abraham (1 Clem. 10:1 and 17:2). There is however, nothing particularly distinct in these designations except that in 1 Clem. 10:1, the phrase "Abraham styled 'the friend, was found faithful...." may suggest that in Clement's mind Abraham was called "the friend" before he was found faithful.

In this survey of extra-NT literature that shares one or both of the two traits found in James, we have seen that James is similar to Jewish interpretation of Abraham. There are other factors, however, that we must now consider in order to understand what James is saying about Abraham.

A Historical Understanding of the Figure of Abraham in Early Christian Thought and Life.³

In a recent article, T.B. Dozeman³ argues for a particular historical background against which we may be able to understand the interpretation of Abraham in James. Dozeman's attention is focused on understanding the occurrence of σπέρμα Αβραάμ in John 8. He reads the text of the Fourth Gospel as a two-level drama wherein the Sitz im Leben Kirche may shape or colour the stories that are portrayed in the Sitz im Leben Jesu. Further, Dozeman employs the insights of D. Georgi⁴ and S. Sandmel⁵ to make the references to Abraham in John 8 intelligible by noticing a tendency among ancient Jewish writers to use Abraham in a well-developed apologetic that was formulated for Gentiles. From the understanding of Abraham as an apologetic figure that originally functioned for the purposes of a Jewish mission, Dozeman argues that the occurrence and employment of Abraham (σπέρμα Αβραάμ) in Galatians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, and John should be understood as statements in the polemical context of missions. Indeed, those using

Abraham terminology are to be understood as Jewish Christians, or better, Christian Jews who are carrying on a Law-observant mission. We see Paul meeting these Christian Jews as opponents and picking up their Abraham language and thought and then developing his counter-exposition of Abraham in response to these opponents. John 8: 31-59 can be read similarly as a "unified debate against the law-observant Christian Jews from the perspective of the party of freedom."⁶

This interpretation does not work so much to establish a unilinear trajectory in the thought and life of early Christianity as demonstrate a probable historical situation that may have existed in one or several forms. We may conceive of the polemical situation in which Paul was engaged in the following manner:

"teachers" in Galatia → Gal 3 → [2 Cor →] Rom 4.

When a text like John 8 comes into the picture, there are several possible ways of understanding how this element fits into the pattern of the polemic that we have just seen:

(1) "teachers" → Gal 3 [2 Cor →] Rom 4 → John 8; or

(2) "teachers" → Gal 3 [2 Cor →] Rom 4
 ↘ John 8; or

(3) "teachers" → Gal 3 → [2 Cor →] Rom 4, and
 other "teachers" → John 8.

Texts such as Matt 3:9 and Luke 3:8 may be understood to reflect all these same background possibilities and at least one further situation, i.e., a historical conflict with Jewish apologists.

Thus we raise further questions. Do the "teachers" at Galatia have as their predecessors in "Abraham-thinking" a body of Jewish apologists? Or, do Jewish apologists who use an Abraham-argument arise in response to Christian Jews (the "teachers") who employ Abraham for a Law-observant mission? Or, do Jewish thinkers take up Abraham in response to Pauline lines of thought? We may conceive of these alternatives in this way:

(1) Jewish apologists → "teachers" → Paul; or

(2) "teachers" → Jewish apologists
 ↘ Paul; or

(3) "teachers" → Paul → Jewish apologists.

Help for deciding between these options comes from W.G. Braude⁸ who argues that although there probably was not an organized Jewish mission to Gentiles at the time of Paul's missionary activity, there is, however, a strand of rabbinic tradition that affirms proselytization upon the basis of the idea that the Law is for all. In such pro-proselytizing thought Abraham appears as a major figure, the archetype for a proselyte. Braude has argued convincingly that the pattern of thought represented in this strand of rabbinic tradition extends backward to the period contemporary with and prior to Paul's missionary efforts. We may conclude that the first of the alternatives above is clearly the most probable.

James and Paul

Scholars are not in agreement concerning the relation of James and Paul. M. Dibelius⁹ sees James at odds with some Pauline slogans. J. Jeremias argues that James and Paul are not at odds¹⁰ but are dealing with two different concerns. U. Luck claims that pitting James and Paul is not the appropriate method for interpreting either or both.¹¹ R. Walker sees James' view of the relationship of faith and works as different from Paul's; thus James should not be understood as a contradiction to Paul or as an attack against Paulinism.¹² A.E. Barnett holds that James wrote to correct a misuse of Paul.¹³ R.B. Ward says that James may or may not know Paul.¹⁴ W.G. Kümmel reasons that the conceptual distance between James and Paul indicates that James is debating a formalized Paul some years after Paul's death.¹⁵ With such diversity of opinions, we might be at an impasse if it were not for further insights from three sources: (1) J. Louis Martyn¹⁶ suggests that it is profitable to study the occurrences of the word $\tau\iota\varsigma$ in James. $\tau\iota\varsigma$ occurs ten times in James and is used in two distinct ways. On the one hand, the use of $\tau\iota\varsigma$ suggests that the author of James knows a community to which he makes comments (see 1:5; 2:16 5:13, 14, 19-- and perhaps 1:23, 26, and 3:2); on the other hand, the author employs $\tau\iota\varsigma$ to indicate some other person or persons whom he considers in making his remarks (2:14 and 18). Martyn further suggests that when addressing

Soards, Abraham, IBS 9, January 1987.

the community, the author is concerned with an antinomy of $\pi\omicron\lambda\eta\tau\eta\varsigma$ and $\alpha\kappa\rho\omicron\alpha\tau\eta\varsigma$; but when the author speaks with consideration of those whom he knows at some distance, he becomes involved in antinomy of $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ and $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\alpha$. Although James argues this $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ - $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\alpha$ antinomy, he appears to have considered the paradox unreal. (2) D. Bartlett¹⁷ confirms Martyn's second point (regarding these antinomies) when, after pointing out that James' interpretation of Abraham is clearly Jewish in its basic Tendenz, he claims that James does not sound Jewish in distinguishing between faith and works. In fact, Jewish exegesis does not distinguish between Abraham's faith and a manifestation of that faith called works. Bartlett suggests that James is using secondhand terminology in his faith-works discussion and that James has borrowed this nomenclature from Paul or Paulinists. (3) More exact confirmation of the line of thought that we are developing comes from W. Schrage.¹⁸ Schrage points to James' use of the peculiarly Pauline phrase $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\upsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$ $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa$. Schrage avers that the choice of prepositions is distinctively Pauline. Further, James generally prefers to use the article with nouns, while Paul does not. Yet, in 2:14-26 James falls into an anarthrous style. Thus we see that the larger section of Jas 2:14-26 is marked by (1) a distancing use of $\tau\acute{\iota}\varsigma$, (2) an unreal $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ - $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\alpha$ antinomy, and (3) a shift away from typical Jewish exegetical thought. Jas 2:14-26 is also (4) the locus of the peculiarly Pauline coupling of $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa$ with $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\iota\omicron\upsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$, and (5) a lapse into an anarthrous use of nouns not consonant with the general language pattern in the rest of James but that may be found in Paul. We may, therefore, conclude that James, who has basically Jewish presuppositions about Abraham, enters into a polemical dialogue with Paul or Paulinists. Dibelius may be correct in asserting that James is "not writing under the sort of Pauline influence which could be explained as resulting from a reading of Paul's letters."¹⁹ Nevertheless, we may ask if James could not be responding rather directly to something Paul wrote - such as Galatians 3. Only the secondary level of concern displayed in relation to the $\pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\iota\varsigma$ - $\acute{\epsilon}\rho\gamma\alpha$ antinomy prevents us from concluding that James had Paul before him. Therefore,

we are safest to conclude that James has either heard something of Paul or that he is responding to some kind of Paulinist person, group, or activity.²⁰

A Final Note

What can we say about James? We have seen that his basic understanding of Abraham is related to Jewish exegesis. His somewhat awkward treatment of the πίστις-ἔργα antinomy has led us, through consideration of the convergence of several facts, to see James arguing against someone or something Pauline. So, from whom has James learned about Abraham? The information that we have considered causes me to suspect that James knew something about Abraham before he heard of the rather original interpretation of Abraham offered by Paul. I suspect that what James knew (and taught?) about Abraham would have been not unlike Heb 11:8-19. The linear presentation of the faith of Abraham in Hebrews is compatible with the image of linearity in Christian life depicted in Jas 1:1-18. For James πίστις is a stance or commitment that, from time to time, is subjected to τὸ δοκίμιον. The outcome of the testing of faith is ὑπομονή -- a quality beyond faith achieved by the testing of faith. Thus, as a Christian one moves in and through the testing of faith (τὸ δοκίμιον τῆς πίστεως) from imperfection to perfection and completion.

NOTES

1. Gal 3:6-9; 2 Cor 11:21b-23; Rom 4:1-5; Mt 3:7-9; Luke 3:7-9; Jn 8:31-59; Heb 11:8-19.
2. R.E. Brown (R.E. Brown and J.P. Meier, Antioch and Rome [New York: Paulist, 1983] esp.chap.7) argues persuasively that Paul was keenly aware of the situation in the Roman church. Indeed, Brown calls Romans "a letter shaped by Roman Christianity"(105). I would like to thank Brown for making the page proofs of his work available to me prior to the publication of the book.
3. For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see Irving Jacobs, "The Midrashic Background for James II.21-3," NTS 22(1975-1976) 458-461.
4. "Sperma Abraam in John 8 and Related Literature," CBQ 42(1980) 342-358.

Soards, Abraham, IBS 9, January 1987.

5. Die Gegner des Paulus in 2. Korintherbrief. Studien zur Religiösen Propaganda in der Spätantike (WMANT 11, Neukirchen-Vluyn; Neukirchener Verlag, 1964).
6. Philo's Place in Judaism: A Study of Conceptions of Abraham in Jewish Literature (Aug.ed.; New York KTAV, 1971).
7. Dozeman, 357-358.
8. The arrows in the following diagrams are not intended to mean "becomes" but to indicate lines of influence in the history of early Christian thought. In speaking of "lines of influence", I do not mean to indicate anything so definite as a trajectory (see J.M. Robinson and H. Koester, Trajectories through Early Christianity [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971]).
9. Jewish Proselytizing in the First Five Centuries of the Common Era: The Age of the Tannaim and Amoraim (Brown University Studies 6; Menasha, WI: George Banta Publishing Company, 1940).
10. James (11th rev. ed. H. Greeven; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 29 et passim.
11. "Paul and James," Exp Tim 66 (1954-1955) 368-371.
12. "Der Jakobusbrief und die Theologie des Paulus," TG1 61 (1971) 161-179
13. "Allein aus Werken," ZIK 61 (1964) 191
14. "Letter of James," IDB 2 (1962) 795.
15. Letter of James," IDBSup (1976) 469.
16. Einleitung in das Neue Testament (20th ed.; Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1980) 361-362.
17. This suggestion was made to me by Martyn in a NT seminar at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Subsequent conversations with Martyn were important for the development of the present article.
18. "The Epistle of James as a Jewish-Christian Document," SBLASP 1979, ed. P.J. Achtemeier (2 vols.; Missoula: MT: Scholars Press, 1979) 2.173-179.
19. H. Balz and W. Schrage, Die "Katholischen" Briefe: Die Briefe des Jakobus, Petrus, Johannes und Judas (NTD 10; 12th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 29-37, esp. 34-37.
20. James 30
21. S. Laws reaches a somewhat similar conclusion by a different path in The Epistle of James (HNTC; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980) 118-139.