

‘AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED’

Paul, James, and the Gentiles

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ABSTRACT The New Testament is basically a collection of Jewish texts written during a period when the Jesus movement was still part of the diverse Judaism of the first century. Therefore we should expect to find examples of rabbinic biblical interpretation in the New Testament. This article suggests that the apostle Paul used midrash to create an interpretation of Gen 15:6 that allowed Gentiles to be included into the covenant without prior conversion to Judaism (Romans 4:1–12). It is argued that James, the brother of Jesus, in his interpretation of the same verse (James 2:14–24) also used midrash in order to create an interpretation that contradicted that of Paul. It is likely that this reflects an intra-Jewish debate concerning the salvation of the Gentiles. While the majority of Jews within the Jesus movement neither seem to have agreed that Gentiles were not to become Jews, nor were they obliged to observe the Torah, Paul’s solution of including the Gentiles into the covenant may have been perceived as a threat to Jewish ethnic and religious identity.

The New Testament is a collection of ancient Greek texts that constitute the most important part of the Christian Bible, which also includes what is referred to as the »Old Testament,« and in some traditions also the so-called Apocrypha. The »Old Testament« is identical to the collection of texts that constitute the Jewish Bible, the Tanakh, or the Torah in a broad sense. This state of affairs indicates that Judaism and Christianity, which we are used to think of

as two separate, and to some extent contradicting religious traditions in fact, are deeply interconnected. Due to historical circumstances it is easy to forget that the Jesus movement originally was an entirely Jewish phenomenon.

While it is true that some parts of the New Testament date from a period when the Gentile part of the Jesus movement was breaking away from Judaism, no part derives its origin from a period when Judaism and Christianity had become two completely separated religions. The New Testament is in fact, essentially a collection of Jewish writings. If this is true we should not be surprised to find rabbinic biblical interpretation, that is midrash, in the New Testament.

In the following, I will give an example of two midrashim that reflect two rather contradicting standpoints on an issue at the very heart of the early Jesus movement, namely, the relation between Jews and Gentiles within the movement. I will furthermore, try to relate these midrashim to what I consider to be the historical situation that motivated a new interpretation of an existing tradition.

Midrash is often said to fulfill several functions. It is frequently pointed out that midrash supplements details that the biblical text leaves out so that the midrash explains what is unexplained and gives, for instance, details about how the commandments in the Torah are to be interpreted. Midrash is furthermore, said to provide continuity when the Torah had to be adapted to new situations. From time to time, the texts in the Bible had to be re-read in light of contemporary values and beliefs.¹

These latter aspects are crucial for our understanding of midrashim within early Christianity, because it is precisely a »contemporary belief,« namely, the identification of Jesus from Nazareth with the Messiah, that necessitated a re-reading of the ancient texts. By reinterpreting the Torah, Jesus-believing Jews were able to create a system of beliefs that provided continuity with their inherited religious tradition. It is a reasonable assumption that Paul, the Pharisee, shared the belief evident in later rabbinic Judaism, that all interpretations are imbedded in the Torah and also implied by the Torah itself.² Consequently, Paul considered his reinterpretation to be in perfect accordance with Jewish tradition and despite what later became the result of this reinterpretation, at this point in history *Christianity was a variety of Judaism*.

Interaction between Jews and Gentiles

One of the most prominent features of the early Jesus movement was the attitude towards Gentiles. Judaism, especially in the Diaspora had long before the introduction of the Jesus movement, adapted to a life as a minority and developed different strategies of how to relate to a non-Jewish and sometimes hostile, world.

During the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–163 b.c.e.), some Jews strove to become completely assimilated to Greek cultural and religious life and preparations were even made for the transformation of Jerusalem into a Greek *polis*.³ Other Jews considered this to be the utmost apostasy as the author of 1 Maccabees, for instance, who described the Hellenistic Jews as »renegades» who »sold themselves to do evil,» (1 Maccabees 1:11, 15). In Alexandria quite influential groups seem to have been involved in a project of creating a cultural combination of Judaism and Hellenism.⁴ Other Jews stressed the traditional aspects and some,⁵ as the Qumran community, chose isolation from both other Jews and Gentiles.⁶

This multiplicity of attitudes on a social level corresponds to a similar amount of variety on an ideological level when it comes to the eschatological destiny of the Gentiles. For instance, the view that the Gentile nations were to be destroyed or subordinated to Israel in the final days, is to be found in different Jewish texts, from the Bible to the sectarian literature of the Qumran community.⁷ Micah 5:13–15 may illustrate this view:

I will cut off your images and your pillars from among you, and you shall bow down no more to the work of your hands; and I will uproot your sacred poles from among you and destroy your towns. And in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.⁸

Other texts, however, present the Gentiles as full participants in an eschatological salvation.⁹ Isaiah 2:2–4 presents us with a rather different scenario:

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, »Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.»

On a social level, one expression of this latter attitude is evident in the fact that Gentiles seem to have participated in the activities of the synagogue. There are several indications that some Gentiles, despite widely spread negative attitudes towards Jews, were drawn to Judaism. One example is from the Jewish historian Josephus, who in *Bellum judaicum* 7.45, referring to the situation in Antioch in the first century c.e. states that the Jews »were constantly attracting to their religious ceremonies multitude of Greeks, and these they had in some measure incorporated with themselves.«¹⁰ Even though Josephus may have exaggerated the Jewish influence on the Greco-Roman society, it is beyond doubt that non-Jews did exist in the synagogue milieu.¹¹

The synagogue was one of many institutions in the Greco-Roman cities that provided order, community and social stability.¹² It is likely that the mere existence of synagogues exerted influence on people in the cities. Some Gentiles actually converted to Judaism, that is, entered into the covenant between Israel and the god of Israel, while others remained Gentiles, but adopted certain Jewish customs and became god-fearers or sympathizers.¹³ There are reasons to believe that Jews who welcomed Gentiles in their communities also believed that those Gentiles, in some way, would be embraced by the final salvation, without prior conversion to Judaism.¹⁴

To conclude: some Jews, the Qumran community, for instance, thought that salvation was for the Jews only and that the Gentiles would be destroyed in the final days. Other Jews, while certainly having nothing against Gentile conversions to Judaism, nevertheless believed that the god of Israel would save even Gentiles.¹⁵ Exactly how this would be realized, however, is less clear. Unfortunately, we have no Jewish texts from this period, apart from those in the New Testament, that reveal on what grounds Gentiles would be saved.

The Midrash on Genesis 15:6: Romans 4:1–12

With the introduction of the ideology of the Jesus movement, the picture becomes even more complex. According to E. P. Sanders, the dominant Jewish religious system of the period can be described as *covenantal nomism*. In this system, God rewards obedience and punishes transgressions. Since the Torah provides means of atone-

ment, the covenantal relationship can be maintained and, if needed, reestablished. An important aspect of covenantal nomism is that everyone living within the bounds of the covenant will be saved. Sanders' conclusion, after having surveyed different kinds of Jewish literature, is that this was the common pattern of Judaism during the period 200 b.c.e. to 200 c.e.,¹⁶ that is, with the exception of Paul. According to Sanders, Paul presents an essentially different type of religiousness from those found in Palestinian Jewish literature.¹⁷

This conclusion, however, rests on the assumption that Paul's soteriological system applies to both Jesus-believing Jews and Jesus-believing Gentiles. But as pointed out by several scholars, Paul's main concern was the Gentiles and not the Jewish adherents to the Jesus movement, for whom the Torah had not lost its validity as a means of expressing loyalty to the covenant.¹⁸ Consequently, Paul does not deal with the problem of how the Jesus-believing Jews will be saved, since, according to the concept of covenantal nomism, the covenant provides salvation for those within it. It is clear that Paul thought that the covenant now was to be perceived in a new way as a result of the appearance of the Messiah, *but it was the same covenant*.¹⁹

From this perspective, Paul may have been faced with a rather difficult dilemma: on the one hand, he knew that everyone living within the covenant, who is maintained in the covenant by obedience and atonement, will be saved through the mercy of God. On the other hand, it is perfectly clear that this covenant was for Jews only. There is, for instance, a very strong connection between male circumcision and covenantal theology.²⁰ Thus, to enter into the covenant with the god of Israel, a person must be, or become Jewish.

The problem was that Paul, at the same time, seems to have been convinced that Jesus-believing Gentiles were not to become Jews, nor were Jews to become Gentiles. This is explicitly stated in 1 Corinthians 7:18–20 where Paul admonishes the recipients of the letter to remain in the condition in which they were called. The reason why Paul so emphatically prevents Gentiles from becoming Jews may be connected to his belief in the one God. If Gentiles were to become Jews, God would not be the God of all the nations, but only the God of the Jews.²¹ According to Paul, Gentiles had a place in the covenant *precisely as Gentiles* and were consequently *not* to convert to Judaism, were *not* to become

Jews, were *not* to become part of Israel and were *not* to undergo circumcision. Paul's problem was, accordingly, that the Gentiles, as Gentiles, in order to be saved, had to be included into a covenant that certainly provided salvation, but at the same time required Jewishness.

What we find here is a situation that certainly requires a new interpretation of an existing tradition and it would surely take some re-interpretation to solve this seemingly impossible situation. Paul writes in Romans 4:1–12:

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? *»Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.»* Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. So also David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works: *»Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin.»* Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, *»Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.»* How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised.

When reading this text, we must bear in mind, that Paul's concern here is not the Jesus-believing Jews but the Gentiles, their salvation and their relation to the Torah. Within the early Jesus movement it was the Gentiles that constituted the problem, not the Jews, as in the later history of Christianity.

To create a theological solution that enabled Gentiles to be saved through the covenant without becoming Jews, Paul takes his point of departure in one verse from Genesis 15:6, which he cites from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible. The Hebrew

and to some extent also the Greek text are somewhat confused when it comes to deciding who is really reckoned with righteousness. Is it Abraham—or is it God?

This is a good example of how a philologically vague statement is taken as a point of departure for a creative interpretation. Paul, however, removes any ambiguity as is clear from v. 9b, »faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness» (ejlogivsqh tw/ ÆAbraa:m hJ pivsti~ eij~ dikaiosvnhn). God is here the obvious agent who makes Abraham righteous, and while this interpretation probably did not differ from contemporary Judaism, the outcome of the whole interpretation definitely did.

Paul had noted that God made Abraham righteous *before Abraham was circumcised* and *before the giving of the Torah at Sinai*, which according to Paul, implied a way to righteousness apart from the Torah and apart from being Jewish, that is, a way of salvation for the Gentiles through a covenant with the god of Israel. Paul had consequently solved the dilemma by discovering an interpretation that he considered already imbedded in the Torah. It is rather clear that Paul did not think that this solution contradicted the Torah, quite the opposite. In Romans 3:31 he put the question: »Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?», and gives the answer: »By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.»

This implies that Jesus-believing Jews were not to abandon the Torah, but that Gentiles were provided with a means to get into the covenant and thus be saved. It is true that Paul considered faith in Jesus, the Messiah, to be a necessary condition for remaining in the covenant even for Jews, and that he believed that those Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Messiah no longer had a place in the covenant. This eschatological exclusiveness was not unique for Paul, the Qumran community also considered themselves to be the only ones within the covenant. But Paul expected, as did the Qumran community, that in the end all Israel would be saved (Romans 11:26).²²

However, not everyone shared Paul's convictions about the Gentiles and the covenant. Mainstream Judaism certainly did not and not even within the Jesus movement did Paul go unchallenged. It is not hard to understand why. The inclusion of Gentiles into the covenant endangered the entire concept of Jewish self-understanding.

The Midrash on Genesis 15:6: James 2:14–24

Within the early Jesus movement, it seems as the relation to Gentiles was an issue that was not entirely settled. The question had been dealt with at a meeting in Jerusalem in the end of the fifth decade c.e., where Paul, James, Peter and John agreed that the Gentiles did not have to become Jews to be saved and that the areas of responsibility should be divided: Paul would go to the Gentiles and Peter to the Jews (Acts 15: 1–35; Galatians 2:1–10). It seems, however, that the relation between Jesus-believing Jews and Jesus-believing Gentiles gave rise to certain problems. According to Galatians, Jewish and Gentile adherents to the Jesus movement in Antioch used to eat together but after the arrival of »certain people from James» Peter and the other Jesus-believing Jews in Antioch withdrew from table fellowship (Galatians 2:12). This so-called incident at Antioch resulted in a severe conflict between Paul and the other Jesus-believing Jews presumably including James, who was the leader of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem.

I have argued elsewhere in more detail that the reason why James sent a delegation to the Jesus-believing community in Antioch had to do with the status of the Gentile adherents to the Jesus movement.²³ Paul's way of solving the problem of the salvation of the Gentiles by including Gentiles as Gentiles into the covenant may have been considered too radical a solution. To consider Gentile adherents to the Jesus movement as *covenantal partners* would imply their equal status to the Jesus-believing Jews. Such an idea was not likely to be accepted by Jews in general, but was implied when social relations became too close, as in the case of table-fellowship.²⁴

It is likely that James assumed that the relation between Jews and Gentiles in no way had been affected by the coming of the Messiah. Surely, the messianic age had arrived and the salvation of the Gentiles was to be expected, but according to James and presumably the majority of Jews, there was no way of including Gentiles, as Gentiles, into the covenant, and it was furthermore not a necessary condition for their salvation. James may have found the prevailing relations between Jews and Gentiles sufficient. Jesus-believing Gentiles could relate to the Jewish Jesus-believing community as any Gentile to any Jewish community, namely as a kind of god-fearer. This, I believe, is

the background of the conflict between Paul and James that Paul refers to in Galatians 2.²⁵

There were certainly Jesus-believing Jews who thought that the only way to be saved was to become a Jesus-believing Jew, that is, salvation is for the Jews only. Acts 15:1 mentions »certain individuals,» who claim that men must be circumcised in order to be saved. Acts 15:5 refers to »some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees,» that demanded that the Gentiles should be circumcised and ordered to keep the Torah. James probably did not go that far, he had after all, reached an agreement with Paul that the Gentiles did not have to become Jews.²⁶ But had he agreed on their inclusion into the covenant?

It may be the case that this conflict between two opposing ways of relating to Gentile adherents to the Jesus movement is reflected in the letter of James or in the later tradition. In modern scholarship the author of the letter has usually not been identified with James, the brother of Jesus, who was involved in the Antioch incident.²⁷ On the other hand, as pointed out by R. Bauckham, »the letter can be taken for what it purports to be: an encyclical from James of Jerusalem to the Diaspora.»²⁸ In any case, the letter seems to reflect the fact that Paul's standpoint (or interpretations of it) was subjected to severe criticism. What is also clear is that the author of the letter engages in the discussion using the same means as Paul, namely, midrash.

When the author of James interprets the same verse as Paul, Genesis 15:6, in James 2:14–24, the focus is entirely different, and it is hard not to understand this interpretation as a direct reaction to the midrash of Paul in Romans.

What good is it, my brothers, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, »Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,» and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, »You have faith and I have works.» Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder. Do you want to be shown, you senseless person, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active

along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, *»Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,»* and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

As is evident, the author puts the emphasis differently. What may strike us first is that he connects the faith and righteousness of Abraham to a completely different situation—the sacrifice of Isaac. The reason for this is, of course, that the author aims at an interpretation that contradicts Paul's. By changing the focus of the interpretation of Genesis 15:6 he removes any possibility of using the text as a proof of Gentile inclusion into the covenant without circumcision. If Abraham was not made righteous through faith alone, but through a combination of faith and works, and if Abraham's faith is disconnected from the promise of becoming a great people, Paul's argument loses its persuasive power.

Conclusion

We can observe here how different situations necessitated different interpretations of the same text, but also how different theological outlooks influenced interpretation. It is also evident that there were different Jewish concepts of what the identification with Jesus of Nazareth and the Messiah meant. Several of these are found within the New Testament, we have briefly examined two.

Paul's interest in Romans 4 was directed at the Jesus-believing Gentiles and the theological basis for their salvation. By means of rabbinic hermeneutics—midrash—Paul challenged several vital aspects of Jewish self-perception. The author of the letter of James may have anticipated the social consequences of Paul's theology or some specific interpretation of Paul, and by using rabbinic hermeneutics—midrash—he advocated an alternative understanding of the biblical text. This attitude seems to have been remarkably perspicacious. As we know, Paul's social experiment failed and within a few generations Christianity had in all essential aspects become a Gentile, non-Jewish religion.

Notes

1. Holtz 1984b, 180–1. See also Hedner-Zetterholm 2002, 4–8 for a discussion of different ways of defining midrash.
2. Stemberger 1996, 31; Holtz 1984a, 16–18 and 1984b, 185–6.
3. Hengel 1974, 1:267–309.
4. Barclay 1996, 48–71; Zetterholm 2003a, 63–4.
5. Zetterholm 2003a, 80–8.
6. Sanders 1994, 352–63 and 1977, 240–57.
7. Donaldson 1977, 52–4.
8. Scripture quotations are from the NRSV.
9. Donaldson 1977, 69–74.
10. Transl. by Thackeray (LCL).
11. Zetterholm 2003a, 121–4.
12. The synagogue was generally considered one of many *collegia*, see Harland 2003, 210–12; Richardson 1996 and 1998, 18, 19 and 2003; Rajak 1999, 164–6; Meeks 1983, 32. Cf., however, Levine 2001, 27–8 who points out that one must not disregard the differences between the synagogue and other *collegia*. The synagogue had both a wider range of activities and of privileges than other *collegia*.
13. See Cohen 1999, 141–62 for an overview of different relations between Jews and Gentiles. For a discussion of the existence of god-fearers, see Zetterholm 2003a, 122–3.
14. Sanders 1985b, 218.
15. Fredriksen 1998, 220–1, considers the material to be clustered around two poles ranging from destruction to salvation. Sanders 1995b, 214, has found six discernible predictions about Gentiles in biblical and post-biblical times: 1) the wealth of the Gentiles will flow into Jerusalem, 2) Gentile nations will serve Israel, 3) Israel will be a light to the nations, 4) the Gentiles will be destroyed or, 5) defeated, 6) Gentiles will survive but will not dwell with Israel.
16. Sanders 1977, 419–28.
17. *Ibid.*, 543. See also pp. 543–56 and Sanders 1985a, 207–10.
18. See e.g., Meyer 1980, 66; Tomson 1990, 237; Lapidé and Stuhlmacher 1984, 42; Gaston 1990, 77. For a critique of Sanders view of Paul see Gager 2000, 46–9.
19. Davies 1978, 11.
20. Zetterholm 2003a, 93–5.
21. Nanos 1996, 184.
22. Zetterholm 2003c, 28.
23. See Zetterholm 2003a, 136–64, or Zetterholm 2003b.
24. Cf. Nanos 2002, 316–17.
25. There are, of course, several other ways of understanding the incident at Antioch, see Nanos 2003, 213–16, and Holmberg 2003, 226–31 for alternative views and discussions of my reconstruction.
26. Cf. Esler 1995, who argues that James broke the agreement and meant that the Jesus-believing Gentiles should be subject to circumcision.
27. See e.g., Dibelius 1976, 11–21 or Painter 1999, 234–48.
28. Bauckham 2001, 106.

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