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Chapter 8

ABRAHAM IN NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS

Chris Tilling

Introduction

Abraham remains at the center of complex debates in Pauline scholarship. An analysis of Abraham in the New Testament letters must focus upon two chapters in particular: Romans 4 and Galatians 3. But before exegetical comment is made on these texts, it will be important to examine scholarly taxonomies for understanding the relationship between Abraham and Paul. These will be analyzed and found wanting. Instead, alternative distinctions will be suggested, which will facilitate engagement with the data, particularly Romans 4 and Galatians 3. Finally, similarities and differences between the deployment of Abraham in Paul's letters and Hebrews will be presented.

Searching for a Taxonomy

Given the centrality of Abraham traditions in certain construals of Paul, it is important to analyze critically common scholarly taxonomies relating to Paul's deployment of Abraham. This will facilitate a more nuanced engagement with the primary material.

N.T. Wright, in his more rhetorical moments, juxtaposes two basic approaches to Abraham in Paul, namely those that present Abraham as an *illustration* of "justification by faith," on the one hand, and those which speak of Abraham in terms of the "*scope and the nature of [his] family*," on the other.¹ This allows the debate between two interpretive paradigms to drive the agenda in scholarly analysis of Paul's use of Abraham. It is a distinction that is pressed through interpretations of Romans 4, the most extensive Pauline engagement with

1. N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections", in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. L.E. Keck et al. (Nashville: Abington, 2002), 489, emphasis is mine.

Abraham. Hence, “old perspective” accounts, on the one hand, are supposed to emphasize “justification by faith” and focus more on Rom. 4:1-8, with its language of “boasting,” being “credited,” “righteousness,” “works,” “faith,” and “wages.” “New perspective” concerns, on the other, will emphasize the social nature of “justification” and the scope of the Abrahamic family.² For this reason, they tend to focus more on Rom. 4:9-17. In Wright’s hands the “new perspective” takes a particular narrative twist. The upshot is that, although he can make more of 4:9-17, it is based upon his wider construal of Paul. So, his argument goes, Abraham is mentioned at this point in Romans because God’s covenant faithfulness is revealed in the faithfulness of the Messiah. This is to say that God’s promise to Abraham, to bless the families of the world by means of this covenant family, can now come about despite Israel’s unfaithfulness (Rom. 3:3), because the Messiah of Israel, her representative, is faithful (Rom. 3:21-31). This is why Paul mentions Abraham in Romans 4, because, now the covenant righteousness of God has been revealed, Paul returns to its basis, the promise to Abraham to create a family of faith.³

This awareness of commitments to either “old” or “new” perspectives can illuminate readings of Romans 4. For this reason, the twofold (old or new perspective) taxonomy is used to structure John Barclay’s recent engagement with Romans 4, in such a way that simultaneously seeks to drive a course between these two reading paradigms. It will serve both this section, and the following (for reasons that will become clear), briefly to overview Barclay’s approach to Romans 4.

Barclay proposes, with Douglas Campbell (see below), that Rom. 3:27-31 begins the argument which continues in Romans 4,⁴ and he endorses the broad twofold taxonomy, which we have used Wright to exemplify. Hence, he argues that Romans 4 is concerned with “the scope [or goal: the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews] and the means of justification,” namely justification by faith. Here “scope” is taken to refer to “new perspectives,” while “means” refers to “old.” But rather than accepting this either/or, Barclay’s reading will unite what others have sundered. Hence, he argues, reference to Abraham “encapsulates both the means (through faith, 4:1-8) and this goal (Jew and Gentile alike, 4:9-12).”⁵ The social goal, the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews, follows elaboration on the *means* of justification as this is the way the goal will be obtained, in “faith dependence upon a divine decision irrespective of inherent human worth.”⁶ Barclay thus draws his wider thesis

2. Introductory summaries of “old” and “new” perspectives can be found in many places, including S. Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); K.L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

3. For this in deliberate debate with “justification by faith alone” approaches, see Wright, “Romans,” 464–505. See now also N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 774–850.

4. Although this does not make too much of a difference for his exegesis of Romans 4.

5. J.M. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 482.

6. *Ibid.*, 483.

relating to incongruous grace in Paul into Romans 4. So incongruous grace, namely a gift given “without regard to the worth of the recipient,”⁷ grounds Paul’s social goals. The emphasis on faith thus makes sense as the means by which the goal is obtained. For “faith,” as he defines it in exegeting Galatians 2, is not an “alternative human achievement nor a refined human spirituality, but a *declaration of bankruptcy*, a radical and shattering recognition that the only capital in God’s economy is the gift of Christ crucified and risen.”⁸ Because of this emphasis on the means of salvation, the playing field is levelled, so to speak, which establishes the stated social goal (the inclusion of all without regard for any symbolic capital).

To explicate this in a little more detail, let us first outline Barclay’s account of the first half of Romans 4. Given that Abraham discovered that nothing he “did made him worthy of the favor of God,”⁹ this lack of congruity is repeatedly underscored in 4:4-8, by contrasting “pay” and “gift.” Hence, Abraham’s faith makes sense, registering “a state of bankruptcy by every measure of symbolic capital,” a point underscored by citation of David (4:6-8). God’s gift incongruously given and acknowledged in faith dependence, is then developed in 4:9-12 with reference to Abraham’s chronology, which emphasizes the circumcision that “took place *after* the blessing of Genesis 15:6,” thereby becoming merely a sign of the “righteousness of faith.”¹⁰

Turning to 4:9-12, then, Barclay explains that the goal or scope of salvation comes into purview, namely the inclusion of Gentiles with Jews in God’s blessing. The final section, 4:13-22, then joins these themes by “interpreting the promise to Abraham and his offspring as the impossible creation of a multiethnic family.”¹¹ Rom. 4:13-15 explains that this happens “not through law,” while 4:16-18 makes clear that Abraham is father of many nations “from faith.” Rom. 4:19-22 further elaborate the narratives that speak of Abraham’s faith in God (4:17). The logic throughout, once again, is the incongruity of grace, such that faith apart from works (4:5-6) mirrors hoping against hope (4:18). Both come, as it were, with empty hands, with no means to obtain the promised child (for they were “as good as dead,” 4:19) or the righteousness, apart from works (4:6). It follows that Abraham’s faith is about grasping the incongruous gift. And just as Abraham believed God would create life *ex nihilo*, as it were, so Christ-followers believe in God who has raised Jesus from the dead. So, 4:23-25 applies this (limited) parallel to Christ-believers.

The upshot is that Barclay claims to bring together two competing readings of the significance of Abraham in Romans 4. For “old perspective” accounts, the heart of Romans 4 is the opening eight verses, emphasizing the justification of the ungodly over and against a legalistic soteriology of works. “New perspective” readings, on the other hand, focus on 4:9-17 and the way in which Abraham is presented not as

7. See, e.g., Ibid, 73.

8. Ibid, 383–4, emphasis mine.

9. Ibid, 484. This involves a particular (and problematic) construal of the grammar of 4:1, to which we will return below.

10. See Ibid, 486–7, emphasis his.

11. Ibid, 488.

scriptural proof of a theological principle (the justification of the ungodly by faith alone, or some such), but as the father of a family, including both Jew and Gentile.¹² Barclay thus claims that his reading brings together these themes, highlighting the significance of Abraham as both believer and father of a multi-ethnic family. A twofold taxonomy, therefore, drives Barclay's constructive work.

But the extent to which this account of Abraham (in Romans 4) accurately represents scholarly variations must be disputed. "Old" and "new" perspectives tend to be more nuanced and carefully construed than such sharp distinctions would suggest. Moo's learned commentary on Romans, for example, offers a good example of a so-called "old perspective" reading. Although we would now expect to see Abraham presented as an example of "justification by faith alone," this is not what one reads. Rather, his account is more complicated, such that Abraham is not reducible to "exemplar." Rather, Abraham is also deployed, according to Moo, for polemical reasons. So Paul undermines his "Jewish and Jewish-Christian opponents" who "undoubtedly cited [Abraham texts] against his teaching."¹³ What is more, because Paul's gospel is the "gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1), Paul needs to integrate Abraham into his theological scheme; hence such extended exegesis is found in Romans 4. Related to this, Paul deploys Abraham because he is an expositor of Scripture. Finally, Paul elaborates on Abraham also to draw out the *implications* of *sola fide*. And this is the treatment of Abraham by a self-confessed "old perspective" scholar.¹⁴ It is questionable, then, to insist that "old perspective" approaches present Abraham as an example, or scriptural proof text of a theological argument, namely, "justification by faith alone," and that they do so by relying more on 4:1-8.¹⁵

But it can also be questioned if the "new perspective" is correctly portrayed. After all, Wright, who is deployed as Barclay's evidence for a "new perspective" reading that focuses on the latter half of Romans 4, doesn't fit as neatly as one would expect. As Barclay himself acknowledges, Wright's own account of 4:1-8 has been strengthened more recently (even if he still fails, in Barclay's eyes, to account for 4:4).¹⁶ But as we shall explore next, Wright has more recently adjusted his taxonomy for understanding readings of Abraham in relation to Paul, moving decisively beyond the twofold approach evidenced in Barclay and the early Wright.

12. See Ibid, 479–80.

13. D.J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 256.

14. Moo, *Romans*, 255.

15. Though reference to Longenecker's recent commentary could be made, where Abraham is *exemplum* (cf. R.N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 475–537.

16. See Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 481 n.84, and reference to Wright's essay, "Paul and the Patriarch", now reprinted in N.T. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 554–92. Indeed, Wright is well aware of the dangers involved here, and insists that "[n]othing that I have said means that (as some have suggested) I have allowed ecclesiology (the single worldwide family) to elbow soteriology (how people are rescued from sin and its consequences) out of the picture" (587).

Be that as it may, Barclay still presents an elegant, as well as economic, exegetical case relating to Romans 4 and Abraham, and we will lean on some of his exegetical insights in our own constructive case below.

Wright's aforementioned recent work clarifies matters considerably, and offers the following six-fold taxonomy for understanding the ways scholars imagine Paul's relationship with Abraham in his arguments:

- (a) Paul only refers to Abraham because his opponents have done so and he must defeat them on their own ground, but left to himself he would not have mentioned the patriarch.
- (b) Paul is happy to introduce reference to Abraham, but only because this provides him with a convenient but random scriptural proof-text for a doctrine, in this case "justification by faith," whose real ground is elsewhere.
- (c) Abraham is a kind of "test case" for Paul's doctrine, not just a proof-text; Paul needs to be able to show some continuity with Israel's founding fathers.
- (d) Abraham is the "narrative prototype" whose faith prefigures the faithfulness of the Messiah.
- (e) Paul is expounding the covenant-making chapter (Genesis 15) in order to show that the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel is (however shocking and paradoxical it may be) the fulfilment of this ancient promise.
- (f) Paul envisages a smooth, continuous, salvation history in a crescendo all the way from Abraham to Jesus.¹⁷

My proposal is that this taxonomy, though considerably more helpful than the twofold account enumerated above, is constructed on the basis of an unnamed commitment to the controlling force of a particular account of *necessity*, which will ultimately distort matters. That is to say it constructs these six options (a–f) in relation to the extent to which these categories assume Paul's engagement with Abraham to be necessary in the mind of the Apostle. The taxonomy is, then, about degrees of Abraham's importance construed in a very particular manner. In the following, I will parse and examine Wright's proposal bearing in mind my claim that much hangs on Wright's conception of necessity.

To take Wright's (a), then, the key phrase is that "left to himself" Paul "would not have mentioned the patriarch." In other words, Paul's reference to Abraham is based *entirely* on contingent factors, here related to the presence of Paul's (usually Jewish-Christian) opponents.¹⁸ He puts it even more sharply elsewhere, claiming

17. Wright, *Pauline Perspectives*, 555–6.

18. These characters are variously named. "Teachers," "Judaizers," "opponents," "counter-missionaries," and so on. It is not necessary to canvass these differences now. It is enough simply to state that I propose "counter-missionaries" captures best their activity and role. Ultimately, however, not too much hangs on this. A summary of various positions can be found in J.J. Gunther, *Saint Paul's Opponents and Their Background* (Leiden: Brill, 1973). See also S.E. Porter, ed., *Paul and His Opponents*, Vol. 2 (Pauline Studies; Leiden: Brill, 2005).

that “the suggestion that Paul would not otherwise have brought Abraham into the argument strikes me as the thin edge of the Marcionite wedge.”¹⁹ Paul’s recourse to Abraham would thus be entirely contingent, and as far away from “necessary” for Paul as it could be. In Galatians, so the argument goes, Paul is *forced* to engage with the figure of Abraham precisely because the troublesome counter-missionaries were deploying Abraham as the perfect example for why Gentile believers in Jesus should be circumcised.²⁰ Abraham is thus only important to Paul in so far as the issue is put upon him by others.

It should be obvious that this first category is directed at “apocalyptic” readings of Paul, which foreground the historical particularity of Galatians (and sometimes Romans) as responses to the activity and preaching of certain Jewish-Christian counter-missionaries. But it should immediately be noted that Wright’s category is somewhat forced given the fact that even Martinus de Boer does not argue that Paul’s only reason for alighting upon Abraham is the activity of the “new preachers in Galatia.” De Boer, to the contrary, argues as follows: “One probable reason [for citing Abraham] is that the Galatians have been hearing much about Abraham from the new preachers in Galatia.”²¹ Not even J. Louis Martyn, who famously foregrounds the interpretive significance of the “Teachers,” can be read as suggesting that Paul wouldn’t speak of Abraham unless it were not raised by his (exegetical) opponents. After all, as Martyn himself points out, Paul “gladly accepts” the theme of descent from Abraham, “affirming without ambivalence that ‘children of Abraham’ is one of the ways of naming the church of God.”²² It is important for Martyn, however, that the terms on which Paul engages with the patriarch are determined primarily by the “Christ-event.” Furthermore, Douglas Campbell spends a good deal of space in his most recent book outlining the various reasons why Paul engaged with Scripture—and scriptural characters, including Abraham—even if he would agree with Martyn and de Boer that the most pointed reason for deploying Abraham in Romans 4 and Galatians 3–4 was due to the argumentation of the counter-missionaries, and the claims they were making about Abraham.²³

There were many reasons why Paul might make recourse to Abraham, yet it made sense, in Galatians in particular, to discourse on Abraham in a certain manner due to the argumentation of Paul’s opponents. For these reasons, then, it is doubtful that apocalyptic readings are an example of the claim that if “left to himself” Paul would “not have mentioned the patriarch.” If contingent factors determined Paul’s particular use of Abraham in Galatians and Romans, it does not follow that Abraham is important to Paul only in so far as the issue was forced

19. Wright, “Romans”, 488.

20. This is admittedly not an undisputed position, but most Pauline scholars affirm it.

21. M.C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary* (The New Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 186, emphasis mine.

22. J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB (London: Doubleday, 1997), 306.

23. D.A. Campbell, *Paul: An Apostle’s Journey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 153–60.

upon him by others. But, if not apocalyptic readers, to whom does Wright's first category refer? I submit that his category is a rhetorical construct, created by the demands of a scale of necessity.

Moving up the necessity scale, we turn to Wright's (b). Paul is now "happy" to introduce Abraham, "but only because" it is convenient. Abraham can illustrate the doctrine of "justification by faith," but this relationship is *not necessary*. The real ground of this doctrine "is elsewhere." It should become more obvious, now, that Wright's rhetoric is designed to create a taxonomy based on an evaluation of Paul's intentions, or mental landscape, in terms of necessity. For, now moving up the necessity scale even further, Wright turns to (c), in which Abraham is deployed as a "test case." So, in contrast to (b), Abraham isn't referred to merely as a *random* proof text, but because there is a measure of necessity. Wright refers to Simon Gathercole's claim as representative of this (third) category, that Abraham "is not *an* illustration from the Old Testament ... he is *the* example. If Paul's theology cannot accommodate him, it *must* be false."²⁴

This all leads to Wright's final three categories, which interestingly turn to narrative as representing what must be the most fundamental level for understanding Paul's relationship to Abraham in terms of necessity. Now Abraham is internal to the core framework of Paul's narrative thought-world, and for this reason it would be unthinkable for Paul not to mention the patriarch. So from (d), where Abraham is "the 'narrative prototype'" of the faith of the Messiah, Wright promotes (e), which presents Paul's argument about Abraham as the (paradoxical) unfolding of Paul's central narrative commitments, such that Christ is seen as "the fulfilment of this ancient promise" to Abraham. His final category, (f), adjusts (e) in obvious debate with his own critics, whom he opines take issue with his narrative argument due to its emphasis on narrative continuity or "smoothness". This suggests that Wright imagines that the highest degree of necessity would be in a presentation of Abraham, in relation to Paul's gospel, as the smooth and obvious continuation of the narrative of Abraham.²⁵

This suggests that Abraham is seen as most important or necessary, for Paul, if he is construed as an internal and non-negotiable element of Paul's theological narrative, which explains the nature of Wright's exegesis of Romans 4 in light of Romans 1–4, outlined above. This is, Wright argues, the furthest point one can get from apocalyptic readings which "would not have mentioned the patriarch" if it were not for Paul's opponents, establishing the logical coherence of his taxonomy.

However, a few further critical points should now be mentioned. Not only are some of these categories straw-men, as we have already noted, they also construct

24. See S.J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 233, emphasis original, cited in Wright, *Pauline Perspectives*, 555.

25. Wright imagines that "apocalyptic" readers are concerned about continuity as opposed to discontinuity, but the matter actually hinges on the *terms* of continuity, which all agree are part and parcel of understanding Paul.

falsely contrasting positions. That is to say, it is entirely feasible to maintain that Paul's occasion to make reference to Abraham was conditioned by the needs of a particular community, in light of the activity of certain "counter-missionaries." But this need not be taken as a reason for thinking Abraham is thus purely incidental to Paul's theological landscape, as argued above. An "apocalyptic" approach, for example, may suggest that the most obvious reason why Paul made reference to Abraham in, say, Galatians 3–4 or Romans 4, was the content of the teaching of the counter-missionaries. But the fact that Paul engaged in this discussion implies shared commitments with the Galatians and counter-missionaries. After all, it can be agreed by all in these debates, that Paul speaks of Abraham due to a shared commitment to the Scriptures of Israel, even if the precise extent of Paul's "canon"—as well as the different ways "canon" would likely have been understood—are accepted.²⁶

Abraham was a fundamental part of Paul's shared scriptural resource. Framing the matter in this way, however, is not to commit Paul to a particular account of a supposed wider scriptural-narrative imagination, and to muscle this "controlling story" into Paul by means of "intertextual maximalism."²⁷ Narrative matters can be alternatively handled.²⁸ Paul's recourse to Abraham need not be attached to narrative in precisely the way Wright imagines for Abraham to remain a necessary part of Paul's theological "symbolic universe,"²⁹ "cultural encyclopedia,"³⁰ and so on. Indeed, Foster has argued that Abraham, for Paul, should be understood as constituting a "mythomoteur," which is defined as a community's "driving political myth."³¹ Abraham, as such, provides "shared meanings that unite otherwise disparate subgroups, factions, or parties";³² hence he speaks of the "Abrahamic mythomoteur" in Paul's letters.³³ The point is both that necessity need not be

26. On these often neglected issues, see H. Lichtenberger, "Das Tora-Verständnis im Judentum zur Zeit des Paulus", in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. J.D.G. Dunn (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 7–24; F. Crüsemann, *Das Alte Testament als Wahrheitsraum des Neuen: die neue Sicht der christlichen Bibel* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2011); T.M. Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 85–98.

27. C. Tilling, "Paul and the Faithfulness of God. A Review Essay (Part 2)", *Anvil* 31, no. 1 (March 2015): 57–69.

28. See C. Tilling, "Paul, Christ, and Narrative Time", in *Christ and the Created Order: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy, and Science*, eds. A.B. Torrance and T.H. McCall (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 151–66.

29. P.L. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Anchor, 1967).

30. U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976).

31. R.B. Foster, *Renaming Abraham's Children: Election, Ethnicity, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Romans 9*, WUNT II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 43–4.

32. *Ibid.*, 44.

33. *Ibid.*, 43–83.

construed in terms of a particular narrative, and that one could accept Foster's position *at the same time* as affirming the contingency of occasion driving Paul's particular references to Abraham in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

Furthermore, it seems that Wright's categories are based on levels of necessity of intention in Paul's mind which are frankly difficult to assess. It sounds as though Wright has succumbed to an "intentional fallacy," at least if intention is understood in terms of mental states as it was in pre-Wittgensteinian linguistics.³⁴ Certainly, "intentionality" need not be so understood, nor do I wish here to endorse "the death of the author,"³⁵ so Thiselton's turn to Searle and speech-act theory, to address this challenge is helpful.³⁶ But Wright's taxonomy does not align with Thiselton's adjustments, namely that "[i]ntention is better understood adverbially: to write with an intention is to write in a way that is directed towards a goal."³⁷ Rather, Wright's taxonomy is based upon consideration of an alleged scale of necessity in Paul's mind, from "must do so because of his opponents" through to "Abraham is a fundamental aspect of his mental (narrative) furniture," so to speak, and thus is of necessity referred to irrespective of contingent factors. Hence, the arguments of Wimsatt-Beardsley's critique of the "intentional fallacy" may cast a shadow over Wright's categories.

Another way of phrasing this critique of Wright's taxonomy is to suggest that he has muddled together two separate (but of course related) questions about Paul's deployment of Abraham. Namely, Wright has collated two questions that need to be treated—to a certain extent and at least procedurally—separately: "*why* does Paul refer to Abraham in such and such a context?" and "*what* is Paul doing in referring to Abraham in these verses?" This allows for certain categories, which Wright divides, to be brought back into play together, thus avoiding false either-or statements.

Asking why Paul mentions Abraham is an important question, of course, but is one best assessed according to the nature of Paul's deployment, namely with recourse to the *what* question. In order to establish what Paul is doing in referring to Abraham, numerous factors come into play. Namely, one needs to consider the following two issues.

First, one must negotiate wider theological construals of Paul's theology which are taken to frame given pericopes, and thus determine rhetorical strategy, emphases, etc. This will take account of specific traditions, such as "old perspectives," front-loading "salvation-history," "social scientific" readings, "apocalyptic" approaches, "Paul within Judaism," and so on. What Paul is doing with Abraham will, to a certain extent, hang on the way the textual data is framed by such

34. See e.g., the famous essay W.K. Wimsatt and M.C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in *20th Century Criticism*, ed. D. Lodge (London: Longman, 1972), 334–45.

35. R. Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. S. Heath (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Hill and Wang, 1977).

36. See A.C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 558–62.

37. *Ibid.*, 560.

paradigms.³⁸ It was shown above that these issues have dominated the two taxonomies already summarized. The first, twofold account, divided portrayals of Abraham between old and new perspectives. Wright's more elaborate taxonomy is a little bit more difficult to clarify in such terms, but it is possible. So (a) represents "apocalyptic" approaches, (b) "old perspectives," and (c) to (f), "new perspectives," particularly those which deploy a narrative framework, namely Wright's own. This is all largely unspoken in Wright's taxonomy, and a focus on the primacy of the *what* question allows greater nuance and flexibility, simultaneously avoiding straw-men.

Second, foregrounding the *what* question means to assess the way Paul's actual argumentation and concrete Pauline textual data coordinates Abraham with other Pauline themes. A danger associated with Wright's taxonomy is that classifications of accounts of Paul's deployment of Abraham are categorized according to structures and construals that are not explicitly named or detailed in Paul's letters.³⁹ This is not to suggest that a "thick description" of Paul's letters,⁴⁰ and the work of foregrounding the historical particularity of Paul's letters, should be ignored. On the contrary.⁴¹ The issue, rather, is a matter of methodological prioritizing, and we will insist that Paul's letters must remain center-stage in this task. To do this, Paul's language about Abraham needs to be coordinated and understood in terms of the proximate themes in play. So, in Galatians 3, this will mean assessing Paul's Abraham-language (3:6-9, 14, 16, 18, 22) in terms of: the experience of the Spirit (3:1-5); the Christ-language which shapes the whole chapter (3:13-14, 16, 22-29); the various references to πίστις (3:2, 5, 7-9, 11-12, 14, 22-26); and so on. This leads to a portrayal of Paul's Abrahamic language that can be more realistically plotted.

There are a variety of ways to graphically represent data, but the radar chart might be a useful analogy for the method suggested here, for it allows one to coordinate specific information (here, the Abraham-language) in light of multivariate data.⁴² As we shall see, these decisions are of no small importance, and

38. On the terminology of "paradigm," see T.S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Vol. 2, no. 2, *Foundations of the Unity of Science*, 2nd edn., reprint 1967, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), and Hacking's introduction in the 50th anniversary edition: T.S. Kuhn and I. Hacking, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions: 50th Anniversary Edition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), xvii-xxv.

39. For a critical review of the way this plays out in Wright's account of Pauline theology in general, see Tilling, "Paul and the Faithfulness of God", 67-9.

40. See C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (New York: Basic, 1973), *passim*, often referred to by Wright in the volumes constituting his *Christian Origins and the Question of God*.

41. As I have begun to argue elsewhere. See Tilling, "Paul, Christ, and Narrative Time", 164-6.

42. For the application of this method to Paul's Christ-language in terms of the divine-Christology debates, see C. Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology* (2nd edn.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), *passim*.

means that Paul's deployment of Abraham is undertaken in terms of a robust Christological dynamic.

It is more flexible and exegetically engaged, then, to allow the *what* question procedural priority before imputing degrees of necessity to Paul's intentions in referring to Abraham. It facilitates direct engagement with Paul's actual usage of Abraham in particular pericopes, and resists the imposition of categories that might otherwise obfuscate. Our thesis is that greater light can be shed on the way Paul deploys Abraham if these points and distinctions are granted, and so we turn to overview some important textual data in the following.

The Pauline Textual Data

Scattered references to Abraham are found in Rom. 9:7, 11:1, 2 Cor. 11:22, and Gal. 4:22. Most of these brief references are concerned with Abrahamic descent, including Paul's (Rom. 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22), or to establishing the extent of Abraham's fatherhood (Rom. 9:7).⁴³ Gal. 4:22 introduces an allegorical argument (in 4:22-31) based upon Abraham's two sons who are birthed by two women. The women are taken to represent two covenants. Hagar, the slave woman (παιδίσκη), is associated with Mount Sinai, the "present Jerusalem" (τῇ νῦν Ἱερουσαλήμ), who gives birth "according to the flesh," and to slavery. Sarah, the free woman, on the other hand, is associated with giving birth "through a promise," the "Jerusalem above," freedom, and the motherhood of the children of the promise, like Isaac and the Galatians. Often unnoticed, in overviews of Paul's use of Abraham,⁴⁴ is Rom. 8:32, in which Paul quotes a part of Genesis 22, thereby alluding to Abraham's "binding of Isaac." Paul appears to emphasize in particular the love of God in making this allusion.⁴⁵

However, by far the most important and extensive engagements with Abraham come in Romans 4 and Galatians 3. To begin with Romans 4, we immediately confront a famous debate relating to the correct translation of 4:1, which has ramifications for the construal of the chapter as a whole. Indeed, already we observe the force of framing paradigms, as noted above. Is Paul citing Abraham in 4:1 to establish his own argument ("What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has discovered?"), or is this Paul's interlocutor

43. "[N]ot all of Abraham's children are his [true] descendants" (Rom. 9:7). On this chapter, see now Foster, *Renaming Abraham's Children*.

44. See e.g., S. Moyise, *Paul and Scripture* (London: SPCK, 2010), whose chapter "Paul and Abraham" (pp. 31-45) does not reference this passage. See also N.L. Calvert, "Abraham," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne et al. (Leicester: IVP, 1993), 1-8.

45. See D.A. Campbell, "The Story of Jesus in Romans and Galatians," in *Narrative Dynamics in Paul: A Critical Assessment*, ed. B.W. Longenecker (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 97-124.

who asks “What then shall we say that we have found out in relation to Abraham, ‘our forefather according to the flesh?’” Richard Hays has famously argued that the sentence be rendered “What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham (to be) our forefather according to the flesh?”⁴⁶ Crucially, the subject of the verb εὕρισκω is now the first person plural personal pronoun, not Abraham. This has more recently been adjusted,⁴⁷ by Campbell, to read “What then shall we say that we have found out in relation to Abraham, ‘our forefather according to the flesh?’”⁴⁸

Barclay proposes that Hays’ reading is “fatally flawed” due to the presence of the definite article (τὸν προπάτορα), which, he opines, means that “forefather” cannot be read as a predicate,⁴⁹ and so reads the verse in the traditional sense.⁵⁰ But Barclay’s argument is itself flawed. After all, Paul’s letters evidence use of the definite article with the predicate: see e.g., within Rom. 11:11 (and the predicate τοῖς ἔθνεσιν); 11:27 (and the predicate ἡ παρ’ ἐμοῦ διαθήκη); and multiple references in 1 Corinthians, including 6:13; 10:26; 15:39, 56; and so on.⁵¹ So we endorse Hays’ translation, which has the force of foregrounding the diatribal nature of Paul’s argument, which begins in 3:27.

For these insights we turn to an alternative construal of the data as presented by Douglas Campbell, whose lengthy monograph, *The Deliverance of God*, is often overlooked for its account of exegetical details beyond Romans 1–3. A brief introduction to his proposals will begin our more constructive task, to be completed via analysis of Galatians 3. Not only will we lean on some of Barclay’s insights, summarized above, we will also acknowledge the diatribal nature of Paul’s argument (Stowers). The result will be to adopt a modified version of Campbell’s account of the structure of Romans 4 and its link to 3:27–4:2, all of which will demonstrate the contours of Paul’s engagement with Abraham in such a way that honors the demands of the historical-critical task by foregrounding proximate themes (note our discussion above relating to taxonomies), thus presenting a controlled reading of the significance of Abraham in this important chapter.

Campbell’s account of the deployment of Abraham in Romans 4 is folded into his portrayal of the purpose of Romans. That purpose, Campbell opines, involves

46. R.B. Hays, “‘Have We Found Abraham to Be Our Forefather According to the Flesh?’ A Reconsideration of Romans 4:1”, *NovT* 27 (1985): 76–98, 81.

47. The adjustments take into account a rendering of the accusative “Abraham” as an accusative of respect.

48. D.A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 724.

49. For this and other points, including reference to Engberg-Pedersen’s complaints, see Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 483 n.88.

50. “What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has discovered?”

51. “Predicate nouns as a rule are anarthrous. Nevertheless, the article is inserted if the predicate noun is presented as something well known or as that which alone merits the designation (the only thing to be considered)”: BDF §273.

negating the influence of hostile “Jewish-Christian” counter-missionaries.⁵² As Stowers earlier argued, “Paul’s resumed dialogue with the teacher in 3:27–4:2 establishes the issues for the discussion of Abraham.”⁵³ Campbell builds on and extends this claim by maintaining that the terms set in this “resumed dialogue” structure Romans 4.⁵⁴ With a degree of tentativeness, he suggests the following construal. Rom. 3:27 begins the diatribe, which continues until 4:2a. Rom. 3:27–28 is a diatribe against “boasting,” and the basis of its refutation (namely by “the teaching of πίστις”); 3:29–30 is a refutation of the claim that salvation is limited to the Jews alone, while 3:31–4:1 pertains to the claim that Paul negates Torah due to the gospel of πίστις, to which Paul responds with a μὴ γένοιτο (by no means!), claiming instead that “on the contrary, we uphold the law.” This, then leads into a debate about Abraham who, in the hands of the counter-missionaries, is the pagan convert to Judaism *par excellence*,⁵⁵ which would affirm the first point in this diatribe, namely about Abraham having something to boast about (4:2).

So Paul’s specific task is determined by a particular occasion: how is Abraham to be understood in this light, and how to wrestle him out of the hands of the counter-missionaries? Paul’s response, now dropping into direct discourse,⁵⁶ begins in 4:2, counter-claiming that any boasting on Abraham’s part would not count “before God.” In 4:3 Paul then turns to engage in extended exegesis, and does so in a way that corresponds to the three issues raised in 3:27–4:1. These three sub-units are 4:2–8, 9–12, 13–22.⁵⁷

Rom. 4:2–8, then, concerns boasting (4:2), the meaning of “works” (4:2, 4, 6), and includes regular references to Scripture, all of which corresponds with 3:27–28. What is involved here, as Barclay argues, is the incongruity of God’s grace, which involves crediting Abraham with δικαιοσύνη,⁵⁸ therefore not according

52. The use of the terms in the inverted commas is, of course, problematically anachronistic, but other options remain cumbersome.

53. S.K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 227. That there is a dialogue, a to-and-fro of debate, is not controversial. But how this is to be understood remains disputed. See some early comments in Hays, “Have We Found Abraham”, 78–9.

54. Indeed, the verbal parallels are strong. See Campbell, *Deliverance*, 725–7.

55. This is indeed how Abraham was understood by Paul’s contemporary Jewish exegetes: see F. Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 172–82.

56. A reading first suggested by S.E. Porter, as documented in Campbell, *Deliverance*, 724, 1122 n.20.

57. In Campbell, *Deliverance*, 728–9, Campbell argues that Romans 4 contains a fourth section, 4:16b–22, which means the third section was 4:13–16a. In recent email correspondence with Campbell, however, it emerges that he now thinks the fourth section should be folded into the third. We have discovered reasons to substantiate this change of mind, as we shall explore below.

58. On this translation, together with associated exegetical decisions relating to the verb λογιζομαι, and the preposition, εις (in 4:9), see Campbell, *Deliverance*, 731–2.

to merit.⁵⁹ This indeed defines the nature of the faith involved, at this point. This without-works trusting (μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ) has an object, namely God, as one who “justifies the ungodly.” Such faith is credited as δικαιοσύνη. Referencing David (4:7) underscores the point: boasting is excluded by the Torah (focused on πίστις); grace is incongruous.

Abraham must, of course, remain the focal point for considering circumcision (Gen. 17). Given this link between Abraham and circumcision, the counter-missionary’s particular distinction between Jew and pagan seems vindicated (3:29). So Paul, in 4:9-12 (corresponding to 3:29-30), shifts from considering an accumulation of works, negated by incongruous grace in the previous verses, to making a temporal point: the time at which Abraham was promised or credited δικαιοσύνη. In agreement with Barclay (see above), this enables Paul to redefine the sign of circumcision (see Gen. 17:11) as a confirmatory seal (σφραγίς), using a term best understood, here, as something which confirms or attests to something created, negotiated or undertaken earlier.⁶⁰ This is precisely why Abraham is able to be the father of those who trust without being circumcised, because a seal is only a confirmation; it is not concurrent to that which it confirms, and therefore not as fundamental. But Abraham is just as much father of all those who are circumcised and who trust. In this way Abraham is the father of all those who trust: Jews and pagans.⁶¹ All ethnically based “symbolic capital,” as Barclay calls it,⁶² are thus excluded by this argument. In these verses, then, Paul extends his initial overture relating to the negation of the accumulation of merit.

In the third, and final, section of Romans 4, Paul begins, in 4:13-15 by contrasting the “law of works” with the “law of πίστις” (now picking up the theme starting in 3:31). Then, having reaffirmed the nature of God’s gratuitous grace in 4:16 and the corresponding dependency on faith, Paul outlines the nature of Abraham’s “heroic” trust, in 4:17-21.⁶³ Wright has argued that the language deployed here directly contrasts with language in 1:20-27.⁶⁴ Abraham’s trust is, here, the reversal of all that went wrong in “the fall.” It is also reasonable to suggest that the message of the counter-missionaries was to promote a Torah of works on fundamentally

59. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, *passim*.

60. See M. Wolter, *Der Brief am die Römer. Teilband 1: Röm 1–8* (EKK; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagsgesellschaft, 2014), 290.

61. Campbell points out how this corresponds now to 3:29-30, and the distinction between Jews and pagans.

62. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, *passim*.

63. “Heroic” is Campbell’s description (see, e.g., Campbell, *Deliverance*, 330), but Paul’s account of Abraham may also have influenced Paul’s choice of words in 5:3, particularly ὑπομονή, which Jewett translates as “fortitude” because it “conveys the quality of ‘manly courage’,” which his analysis suggests should not be repressed by a chosen English gloss (R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007], 354). The reason why Abraham’s faith should be so described at all will be offered below.

64. See, e.g., Wright, “Romans”, 500.

meritocratic grounds, that obedience to Torah would lead to life. This is why Paul's earlier argumentation in this chapter, emphasizing the logic of incongruous grace, was so potent and pointed for Paul's purposes.⁶⁵ But Paul's case, anticipating a fuller account of ethics in the chapters to come, is that the law of faith nullifies the supposed benefit of works. It is fulfilled in trust, as Abraham's heroic faith shows, such that he "was strengthened in faith as he gave glory to God" (4:20).⁶⁶

It is, consequently, much more difficult to extend Barclay's account of faith as "a declaration of bankruptcy" into these verses, for Abraham's trust is spoken of as "hoping against hope," as "not weakening" when he considered his own good-as-dead body and Sarah's barren womb. Instead, Paul repeatedly emphasizes Abraham's positive agency, here, such that "no distrust made him waver . . . but he grew strong in his faith . . . being fully convinced."⁶⁷ Paul concludes from this account of Abraham's "extraordinary fidelity" in 4:22, using the inferential conjunction διό.⁶⁸ *Therefore*, it was credited to Abraham (or "to his advantage" [αὐτῷ]⁶⁹) with δικαιοσύνη.⁷⁰ But this raises interpretive problems that only a Christological dynamic can solve, one which emerges in these verses.

Barclay opines that to speak of Christological dynamics at work towards the end of Romans 4 "is to foist something extraneous onto the text."⁷¹ But this leaves a problem unresolved. Abraham's faith in 4:17-21, after all, might strike the auditors as frankly intimidating, and perhaps more demanding than the message of the counter-missionaries. Let's be clear: the rhetorical emphasis on Abraham's faith in 4:17-21 is not to establish its own bankruptcy.

Of course, this would be to miss Paul's rhetorical point, which is not simply to "have faith like Abraham." Rather, the chapter finishes (4:24-25) with Christological language that picks up on hints in the preceding verses (e.g., 4:17, "giving life to the dead" [θεοῦ τοῦ ζωοποιούντος τοὺς νεκροὺς], cf. with 4:24). Furthermore, 16b is a likely parallel to 3:26, and hence to the faithfulness of Christ.⁷² Likewise, Paul

65. Cf. D.A. Campbell, *Deliverance*, 506-11; D.A. Campbell, *The Quest for Paul's Gospel: A Suggested Strategy* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 248-53.

66. This is why, it should be noted, 4:16a does not end the third section of Romans 4, as Campbell initially outlined in *Deliverance*, as referenced above.

67. To be noted is Paul's refusal to speak of circumcision at this point, which would undermine his rhetoric somewhat.

68. Campbell, *Deliverance*, 744.

69. As, for example, Wallace argues, the dative is "the case of personal interest": D.B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 139.

70. This important Pauline inference from the nature of Abraham's positive and heroic trust, is adequately accounted for by Barclay. Cf. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 489-90.

71. *Ibid.*, 490 n.110.

72. This involves a particular reading of ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. For a balanced account of the debates, see D. Heliso, *Pistis and the Righteous One: A Study of Romans 1:17 Against the Background of Scripture and Second Temple Jewish Literature* (WUNT II; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

explains that Christ is given over to death for the sake of our trespasses and raised for the sake of our δικαίωσις (καὶ ἡγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν), language which associates resurrection and δικαίωσις, and hence language in 4:2, 5–6, with Christ. If Abraham's faith is presented as the opposite of what went wrong, as described in 1:20–27 (Wright), Paul's forthcoming ethical argument, in Rom. 6:2–13, 16–18, 23, will be enumerated in terms of dying and rising with Christ, liberating those in Christ from what is wrong, namely the power of Sin, and so on. The good news for Paul's auditors is not simply the faith of Abraham, but "peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1),⁷³ through whom we hope in sharing the glory of God (cf. 5:2 with 4:20). All of this suggests that no one is "foisting" Christology into these verses: it is important for the cogency of Paul's argument.

This all shows not only that Christology is involved in Paul's argument, but how it solves problems. As Joshua Jipp has argued, "Paul's portrait of the faith of Abraham is generated by his commitment to the revelation of God's saving act through the faithful Jesus who trusted God for his own resurrection in the face of death."⁷⁴ So those in Christ participate, in trust, in Christ's life. This faithfulness, which is part of that ambiguous and difficult life of Christ-followers, together with hope, character, and so on (5:3–5), and which was evidenced in Abraham, is now revealed in the faithfulness of Christ. Paul's argument, then, points to the identity of God as the grounds of his good news. Indeed, Paul's argument has consistently foregrounded the object of faith (4:5, 20–21). Faith is central to these concerns, but Paul's use of Abraham causes us to ask: whose?; and what role does that faith play? Paul's use of Abraham traditions points to the news of God in Jesus Christ. The incongruous nature of the gospel (Barclay), and Paul's confidence in the kindness and grace of God, is based on the activity of God in the life of Christ. As he puts it a few verses later in Rom. 5:8: "God demonstrates his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." So Christ-followers trust, to draw on themes in the immediate frame, by Spirit-participation in the faithfulness of the Messiah (5:1–8). The Christological logic emerging in the final verses of Romans 4 is thus central to the coherence of Paul's argument concerning Abraham's faith.

There is not enough space in this essay to canvas Abraham in Galatians 3 in similar depth, but the outline of Romans 4 above leaves further questions hanging that a careful reader of Genesis will notice: not only does the everlasting nature of this covenant "in the flesh" (Gen. 17:13) pose continued problems, so do the continuing narratives relating to Abraham, Isaac, and circumcision. As Joshua Jipp argues, Rom. 4:22 (διὸ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην), "must refer to God's granting of the birth of Isaac as the means whereby Abraham is made the father of many nations (cf. Rom. 9:7–9)." But this (rightly) brings together what Paul's argument has sought to keep apart, namely Abraham's faith and circumcision, as it

73. This translation assumes ἔχομεν is original, which is disputed. The major commentaries canvas this issue extensively, and the majority accept the reading used here.

74. J.W. Jipp, "Rereading the Story of Abraham, Isaac, and 'Us' in Romans 4," *JSNT* 32 (2010): 217–42, 237.

extends his biography to his children. Hence Jipp notes that “Paul’s argument will, it should be clear, only prove convincing to those who share the christological kerygma that Paul sets forth in 4:24b-25.”⁷⁵ There is, in other words, an issue of establishing the veracity of Paul’s reading, which, as Jipp explains, is grounded upon a Christological hermeneutic. Such matters are foregrounded in Galatians 3, to which we now briefly turn.⁷⁶

The claim that Paul, in Galatians, engages in exegetical debate with (Jewish-Jesus Christ-following) counter-missionaries is not as controversial as it is for readers of Romans.⁷⁷ But the way in which Paul deploys Abraham in these verses reflects wider hermeneutical forces that begun to emerge in relation to Romans 4 above. Namely, in Galatians 3 we see Paul establishing the grounds for his own (correct) engagement with Scripture, in debate with wrongheaded scriptural exegesis.

This is to say that Paul seeks to show the way in which the true gospel and its reading of Scripture is established by the reality and impact of Jesus Christ in the lives of these Christ-followers (and his own). Much of Galatians 1–2 was concerned with establishing the revelatory priority of Jesus Christ in Paul’s own story, in explicit contrast with the counter-missionaries and their theology and its impact (Gal. 1:1, 6-16; 2:4, 11-15, 16, 19-21). At the start of Galatians 3 Paul re-emphasizes the reality of the presence of the Spirit in their lives, a life-changing actuality which accompanied the proclamation of Christ’s fidelity (Gal. 3:1, 2, 5),⁷⁸ something also spoken of in Christological terms in Galatians (4:6).⁷⁹ This is not unrelated to what follows, an impression one might obtain, to a certain extent, from the major commentaries. Rather, along with the first two chapters of

75. J.W. Jipp, “What Are the Implications of the Ethnic Identity of Paul’s Interlocutor? Continuing the Conversation”, in *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to Romans*, ed. R. Rodriguez et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 183–203, 190.

76. All of this does suggest, to honor Wright’s own taxonomy, that Paul speaks about Abraham because of the counter-missionaries. This doesn’t make Abraham unnecessary to Paul’s own theology, but Paul is aware of misunderstandings that could be engendered and seeks to avoid them.

77. See n.18, above.

78. Das writes that Paul’s language, here, means he “preached the message of Christ crucified so vividly in his words and life that they could envision it”: A.A. Das, *Galatians* (Concordia Commentary; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 287. The offered translation of ἐξ ἀκοῆς πίστεως (3:2, 5) corresponds best with 3:1, so understood, for it foregrounds the centrality of Jesus Christ in Paul’s missionary proclamation. See also de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, 174–6; Campbell, *Deliverance*, 853–6. It remains, however, a debated translation.

79. On the relationship between God-language, Christ-language and the Spirit in Paul, see M. Fatehi, *The Spirit’s Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul: An Examination of its Christological Implications* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), and now Tilling, “Paul the Trinitarian”, in *Essays on the Trinity*, ed. L. Harvey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 36–62.

Galatians, Gal. 3:1-5 frames Paul's reality-of-Christ-by-the-Spirit reading of Scripture, and particularly Abraham (mentioned eight times in Galatians 3 alone).

This is why Paul begins 3:6 with a comparative coordinating conjunction (καθώς), for what he is about to detail with respect to Abraham (and his faith) relates the message of πίστις, namely the content of the gospel proclamation about Jesus.⁸⁰ The reality of Jesus constrains his reading of the Scriptures in a particular way, and this is his point. Hence Paul assumes the links he does between Abraham, faith, the Galatians, and Christ (Gal. 3:6-9). Hence Paul presents Scripture as an active witness in understanding what God has done in Jesus Christ (3:8. See also 3:22; 4:30).⁸¹ This is also why Paul does not seem phased by the obvious counter-argument that the descendants of Abraham are established through Isaac, and thus involves circumcision (see above), for that would simply be problematic exegesis, i.e. Scripture reading not in tune with the reality of God in Christ. This is why Paul understands the promise to Abraham (see 3:15-18) to be about Abraham and the one offspring, namely the *one* person, Christ (ὡς ἐφ' ἑνός· καὶ τῷ σπέρματί σου, ὅς ἐστιν Χριστός, 3:16). This is why his exegesis flows straight into language which emphasizes the relation between Christ and his followers ("in Christ Jesus you are all children of God . . . baptized into Christ . . . clothed [. . .] with Christ . . . one in Christ . . . belong to Christ," 3:26-29). The counter-missionaries are using the Scriptures incorrectly due to an exegesis that does not sufficiently allow Christ to shape it.⁸² The reality of the God of Scripture is bound up with the presence of Jesus Christ and God in their midst by the Spirit. Paul's engagement with Abraham, in other words, is established by the need to demonstrate the insufficiently Christological exegesis of his opponents, not because of abstract or academic distinctions, but because the alternative undermines their own experience of Christ and the Spirit of God (3:1-5).

This raises further questions relating to the veracity of Paul's engagement with Abraham, which would likely leave his interlocutors unimpressed. But there is only space to mention two in passing. It can be argued that the basis for Paul's truth claims, as we have argued was especially clear in Galatians 3, is the reality of God by the Spirit, in the career of Jesus Christ. Certainly, this could be understood as a Pauline "dogmatic imposition." But for Paul, this reading of Scripture in general, and the Abraham traditions in particular, represents his understanding of the reality of God in Christ, in whom God reveals his love (Rom. 5:8), and in

80. Cf. H. Balz and G. Schneider, eds., *The Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 226. Das correctly argues that καθώς, here, "refers backward to 3:1-5", but his exegesis of what follows does not sufficiently demonstrate the import of this insight for Paul's following exegesis, and is, instead, content to make superficial points about the correspondence of πίστις language throughout (Das, *Galatians*, 300).

81. See B.R. Gaventa, "The Singularity of the Gospel: A Reading of Galatians", in *Pauline Theology*, Vol. 1, *Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, ed. J.M. Bassler (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 147-59.

82. "[T]hey view God's Christ in the light of God's Law, rather than the Law in the light of Christ": L. Martyn, *Galatians*, 124.

whom are hidden “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3).⁸³ This leads Karl Barth, with Overbeck, to claim that the OT “did not, in the ordinary sense of the word, ‘precede’ Christ. Rather it lived in him.”⁸⁴ Precisely “[t]his is the claim we make for Abraham.”⁸⁵

An alternative approach to the veracity of Paul’s exegesis is presented in Matthew Thiessen’s important work, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, in which he outlines a case for understanding the logic of Paul’s appeal to Abraham. Beginning with Paul’s commitment that Gentiles must indeed become sons of Abraham, Thiessen asks the important question as to why this is the case. The solution, he maintains, is in the link between faith, which makes one a son of Abraham, and the reception of Christ’s πνεῦμα, but not in the sense outlined above. Rather, as he argues, when “God had promised the *pneuma* to Abraham and his seed (Gal. 3:14–16), Paul intends his readers to recognize that Gen. 15:5 and 22:16–18, in promising that Abraham’s seed would be like the stars of the heaven, contained the implicit promise of the *pneuma*, the stuff of the stars/angels.”⁸⁶ Gentiles who receive Christ’s πνεῦμα thus become Abraham’s seed. Paul’s argument is thus a sophisticated exegetical argument that does not hang on Christological realities in the same way.

While these issues need further analysis, it is possible, from the vantage point obtained from the exegesis above, to now ask the *why* question, namely why does Paul make recourse to Abraham. Given that the terms of the debate have been set by the counter-missionaries, it appears Paul’s particular deployment of Abraham in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 is defensively orientated, anxious to avoid misinterpretation. In other words, his particular deployment of Abraham in these passages is bound to very particular contingencies. But this is not to say that Abraham is therefore dispensable for Paul. One could certainly make the case that Abraham is necessary for Paul’s gospel, given the centrality of Abraham in Paul’s Scriptures. And it is obvious that Paul draws lines of continuity between Christ, Christ-followers, and Abraham, especially in Romans 4.⁸⁷ But these lines of

83. For the language in this sentence, see S.V. Adams, *The Reality of God and Historical Method: Apocalyptic Theology in Conversation with N. T. Wright* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), and a critical appraisal in C. Tilling, “From Adams’s Critique of Wright’s Historiography to Barth’s Critique of Religion: A Review Essay of Sam Adams’s *The Reality of God and Historical Method*”, *Theology Today* 73, no. 2 (2016): 168–77.

84. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 118.

85. *Ibid.*, 118, emphasis mine.

86. M. Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 159.

87. Cf. “Abraham, of course, plays a foundational role in the unfolding drama of redemption in the OT, so it is not unexpected for Paul to make significant reference to him in his attempt to persuade the Galatians to accept his view of redemptive history”: D.J. Moo, *Galatians* (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 192; though the last two words may not specify precisely enough what is at stake.

continuity are understood in light of the career of Christ, which means that the terms of Paul's engagement are thereby negotiated by a Christological-hermeneutical disruption. No doubt given different circumstances and more time, Paul could outline the way in which this key scriptural figure relates to Christ and Christ-followers in a whole host of ways that do not emerge in his letters. But the relevant material in Paul's letters is primarily addressing questions raised by his opponents.

Abraham in Hebrews

Space does not permit a similar treatment of Abraham in Hebrews, nor does the scholarly literature demand the same attention, hence this final section is best used to point out the similarities and differences between the use of Abraham in Hebrews and Paul.

The similarities are striking. First, if one accepts the addresses include pagans,⁸⁸ Heb. 2:16 suggests that the seed of Abraham's is likewise divorced from ethnic mores and applied to a mixed "Christian community."⁸⁹ Lane also argues that the σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ is taken as a description of "the community of faith,"⁹⁰ Similarly for Paul, those who are of Christ are Ἀβραάμ σπέρμα (Gal. 3:29). But to be noted is that both Paul and Hebrews continue to speak of the seed of Abraham in more ethnic terms as well (cf. Rom. 9:7; 11:1; 2 Cor. 11:22; Heb. 7:5; 11:18), even if these moments remain in the shadow of the reframing undertaken in light of Christ.

Second, this reframing of seed-language in Paul is driven by Christological motifs, as was established earlier. So too for Hebrews. Hence, Johnson argues that the author of Hebrews' "understanding of Jesus shapes the way he reads the story of the people."⁹¹ But we can be more specific. I have argued elsewhere that Paul's Christology, in ways that correspond to Paul's relational epistemology, is consistently spoken of in relational terms, such that an important facet of Paul's Christology is what I have called the Christ-relation. Crucially, this Christ-relation corresponds to Israel's God-relation, which is thus Christological data of great significance.⁹² Likewise Hebrews, according to deSilva, speaks of the reframing of seed-language, in such a way that generates the following effect, namely "to ascribe to the relationship between Jesus and the many sons and daughters the relationship celebrated between God and Israel."⁹³ Furthermore, the extended engagement with

88. For discussion on these matters, see D.A. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle "to the Hebrews"* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 2–8.

89. deSilva, *Hebrews*, 119.

90. W.L. Lane, *Hebrews 1–8* (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, 1998), 63.

91. L.T. Johnson, *Hebrews: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 169.

92. On all this, see Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology*.

93. deSilva, *Hebrews*, 119.

Abraham traditions in Hebrews 7 is undertaken in the service of a Christological argument about Jesus as High Priest, which arguably corresponds to Paul's "in Christ" language, at least in so far as it serves to encourage these communities that Christ's agency, or Christ's career, present the faithful before God in terms established by Christ (cf. e.g., Rom. 8:1, 33-34; Phil. 3:9; and compare with Heb. 4:16; 7:24-27; 9:11-15, etc.).⁹⁴ As Macaskill has argued "The author to the Hebrews ... may have nothing that resembles the "in Christ" language found in Paul. What he does have, however, is a thoroughgoing concept of access to the divine presence in the heavenly temple that is grounded in the ontology and history of the Incarnate Son, the heavenly High Priest."⁹⁵

Third, Hebrews associates Abraham with the promise in such a way that avoids discussing circumcision (6:13, 15), which relates to Paul's rhetoric in Galatians 3 and Romans 4, even if their reasons for this distancing of the promise and circumcision are different.

Finally, the depiction of Abraham's faithfulness in Rom. 4:18-22, which leads to the advantage of being credited with δικαιοσύνη, can be compared with the way Heb. 6:15 presents Abraham as one who, "having patiently endured, obtained the promise." The heroic nature of Abraham's faith, in Rom. 4:18-21, likewise resonates with language in Heb. 11:8, 17.

The differences between Paul and Hebrews must also be noted. First, the particular Christological rhetoric in Hebrews is undertaken in the service of establishing the high priesthood of Christ, which does not interest Paul. Second, what could be called the "divine conditions" relating to the promise to Abraham are, in Hebrews, elucidated in exegetical comment on Gen. 22:16. So the author explains that "God made a promise to Abraham, [and] because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself" (Heb. 6:13). Finally, the relationship between πίστις and obedience is elaborated in a different way in Hebrews, such that the focus becomes Abraham's *journey*. So deSilva writes, in comment on Heb. 11:8-16, that the "... portrayal of Abraham's faith emphasizes not, as in Paul, the firm conviction that God would fulfill his promise to give Abraham offspring

94. Some of the "pastoral" dynamics, associated with high priesthood, which correspond to Paul's "in Christ" terminology, are elaborated in A.J. Torrance, "Reclaiming the Continuing Priesthood of Christ: Implications and Challenges", in *Christology Ancient and Modern: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, eds. O. D. Crisp et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 184-204. One need only compare, say, the definition of union with Christ offered in C.R. Campbell, *Paul and Union with Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 412-14, to see conceptual overlap here. As T. Bertolet pointed out to me, μέτοχοι γὰρ τοῦ Χριστοῦ γεγόναμεν (Heb. 3:14) might deepen these comparisons. See also G.W. Grogan, "The Old Testament Concept of Solidarity in Hebrews", *TynBull* 49, no. 1 (1998): 159-73.

95. G. Macaskill, *Union with Christ in the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 186.

(cf. Gal. 3:15-18; 18; Rom. 4:13-21). Rather, it is his departure from his native land in obedience to God's call (11:8-10) that the author highlights in 11:8-10, 13-16."⁹⁶

To circle back to the discussion above relating to Wright's taxonomy, this is further reason to establish the procedural priority of the *what* question before the *why*, given the very different ways Abraham could be deployed by Hebrews and Paul. The first task must be to establish the various contingencies and concrete arguments of selected texts, before second-guessing the *why* question.

Conclusion

The deployment of Abraham in Paul's letters is best understood, at least in the key texts, as a pastoral response to questions set in motion by hostile counter-missionaries. Paul's exegetical arguments relating to Abraham are to be seen in this light, but that is not to suggest that Paul would not have otherwise made reference to Abraham. Rather, the reality of what God has done in Jesus Christ controls the way Paul understands the exegetical task, and thus the way he makes reference to Abraham, in debate with his opponents. Although Hebrews faces a different set of problems, the upshot of the author's Christological focus means that there are numerous similarities between the letters of Paul and Hebrews in how they engage with Abraham. The differences relate to the historical contingency of each of these texts, which shows how fertile and important the Abraham traditions are for the authors of the New Testament letters.

96. deSilva, *Hebrews*, 393.