

# HOPE AGAINST HOPE

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CHRISTIANS NEED to find in their foundational documents formal attention to attitudes, ideas and values constitutive of their faith. Paul's letter to the Romans offers a treatment of 'hope' which is itself exceptional in the way he contextualizes it and dramatizes it in terms of his basic preaching about God and God's Christ. Painting a vast fresco, Paul tells a cosmic story stretching from first creation to new creation. In a series of vignettes, Paul portrays God in basic, characteristic poses, first God's mercy and just judgment, then God's powers to create and raise the dead. In two allegorical scenes, Paul describes God's dealings with Abraham and Jesus as dramatizations of the way God relates to all. This scenario might be described as an allegory about 'hope', which for Paul means trust that God will be consistent and reliable in what God does, that is to say, show mercy, create, and raise the dead. Even as we view these scenes, Paul calls us to hope in God's faithfulness: 'God is faithful and he will do it!' (1 Cor 1,9; see 1 Thess 5,24). Let us examine the fresco of Romans and be schooled in the ways of God and so come to hope.

## *God's mercy and just judgment*

Paul's remarks on hope in Romans must be situated in the flow of his argument. His focus there is theological,<sup>1</sup> not christological; Paul explains his gospel about Jesus in terms of God's will and actions which are found in the scriptures. One of the pivotal theological ideas in Romans comes from Exodus 34,6-7, the self-disclosure of God to Moses, where God revealed two basic attributes about himself, mercy and justice, which summarize the way God deals with us:

'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast kindness . . . who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children.'

These attributes of God, which are everywhere implicit in Paul's description of God's action, formally underpin the basic structure

of the first eight chapters of Romans, as the following diagram suggests.

<i>Just Judgment:</i>	Rom 1,17-3,20 'The <i>wrath</i> of God is revealed . . . '
<i>Mercy:</i>	Rom 3,21-8,39 'The <i>righteousness</i> of God has been manifest . . . '

According to Romans 1,19-20 mercy was first shown in creation, when God made humankind and endowed them with his 'image and likeness'. With Adam's sin and because of subsequent sins, God's just judgment necessarily replaced mercy (see 2,6-10). Mercy, however, was ever present especially as God sent Jesus to be expiation for sins (3,24-26). Nevertheless, God remains ever our just judge, to whom we will all render an account (2,6-11; 5,9-11; 8,31-39; 14,10-12), a judgment which we meet with hope because of God's past mercy shown us in Christ. Hope, then, is hope in God's abiding mercy.

Paul frequently summarizes his ideas,<sup>2</sup> reminding us of what he said and advancing his thoughts to new implications, a technique evident in Romans chapter 5. He summarizes our progress from being under God's *judgment* to being under his *mercy*, a progress marked by *faith*: 'Since we are justified by *faith*, we have peace with God' (5,1). Our new relationship with God is characterized by *hope*: 'Through Christ we have obtained access to God's grace, and we rejoice in our *hope* of sharing the glory of God' (5,2). Lest such a future seem far off and unreal, proof is offered by the present experience of *love*: 'Hope does not disappoint us, because God's *love* has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us' (5,5). Our entire life with God, then, is marked by *faith* (past mercy), by *hope* (future mercy) and by *love* (present mercy), that is, God's consistent mercy.

Yet God, who is *merciful*, is also *just judge*. And the story of our relationship with God is not over until that final moment when we shall face God at the moment of judgment. Paul would have us consider this event with 'hope' that God's past *mercy* will abide into the future and provide the basis of our standing before God. And so, moving immediately from a résumé of the past (5,1-5), Paul addresses the future (5,6-11), indicating that our experience of God's *mercy* will *not* be replaced by *judgment*. For God must be

consistent! If God showed love for us while we were yet sinners and if we are now justified by Christ's blood, 'much more shall we be saved by him from the (future) wrath of God' (5,9). Reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more shall we be saved at God's future judgment by Christ's life (5,10). God's *mercy*, therefore, whereby we are no longer enemies of God, abides in the future, even at God's judgment seat.<sup>3</sup> Hope, then, relies on the constancy of God's mercy. God must be faithful.

*Abraham's trust in God's two powers*

Under the rubric of describing God's 'mercy' in Christ, Paul instructs us how to think about God. Although Paul has much implicit theology operating in the letter, he parades before us the specific example of Abraham, whose story in the scriptures serves as a paradigm of God's dealings with us and our proper response to this merciful God.<sup>4</sup>

The scriptures are quite explicit on the sequence of God's dealing with Abraham, emphatically underscoring the fact that God granted him a gift of mercy (4,1-5) long before he was circumcised (4,10-12). Furthermore, God promised Abraham a great blessing (4,13-17a), a type of immortality achieved by endless, numerous descendants. Thus far Paul has told us how God works: a giver of mercy, prior to any deserving good deed, confirming by a generous promise—such is the way of God toward Abraham and toward us.

Abraham, however, was no passive recipient of God's benefactions, but embodies the complete response to this God, a response for which he was legendary. Scripture canonizes Abraham as a saint because he 'believed God', which belief was credited to him as righteousness (4,3; Gal 3,6; Jas 2,23). But Paul does not leave the issue that cryptically, as he goes on to explain the content of Abraham's faith.

Of Abraham Paul says, ' . . . in the presence of the God in whom he believed, *who gives life to the dead and calls into existence things that do not exist*', Abraham believed two things about God: a) God creates and b) God raises the dead.<sup>5</sup> On this point Paul reflects Jewish tradition that Israel's deity has two basic powers which comprehensively sum up all of God's dealings with the world. God has creative power to bring the world into existence and executive power to rule and judge, for 'resurrection' was basically understood as 'resurrection unto judgment' (see Jn 5,28-29). For example, Philo of Alexandria, who reflects this

twofold belief in God quite clearly, regularly spoke of God's two *powers*, creative or beneficent power and executive or punitive power:

There are two primary powers of the Existent One, namely that through which He wrought the world, the beneficent, which is called 'God', and that by which He rules and commands what He has made, that is the punitive, which bears the name of 'Lord' (Her 166).<sup>6</sup>

These two aspects of God, of course, correspond in a certain way with God's attributes: creative power can be linked with mercy, and resurrection/executive power with just judgment. And so Paul tells us that God is our beginning and end; God stands before us in creation to bring into existence what does not exist and God stands behind us to rescue from death what has lived out its mortal life. The whole of our life, then, is surrounded by God's gracious power to give life and to renew life.

Although this sounds theoretical, Paul points out how Abraham lived his life based on these two aspects of his trust in God. As regards 'raising the dead'. Paul comments how Abraham thought of his own body, which was a hundred years old, as 'dead' (4,19). Yet Abraham trusted in God precisely as the one who has power to 'raise the dead', even Abraham's withered loins. As regards 'creation', Abraham knew that Sarah's womb was empty, non-creative—'nothing' was there (4,19c). Yet Abraham trusted that God could bring into existence things that do not exist, even a son. And God acted with both powers in the conception of Isaac. Abraham, who knew such things about God abstractly, came to know them experientially.

Abraham's response to God, however, did not come lightly, for his appreciation of his bodily situation argued strongly against God's promise: 'In hope he believed against hope' (4,18a) when he considered Sarah's emptiness and the necrosis of his own body. Although reality challenged Abraham's trust in God's promise, 'he did not weaken in trust' (4,19a). 'No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully confident that God was able to do what God has promised' (4,20). Paul, therefore, describes the content of Abraham's faith, its hard realism, and its vindication.

In this story, moreover, Paul suggests the structure of hope, as well as its content. Since God entered Abraham's world, speaking

a word of promise, Abraham based his trust on that promise, a trust that looks to God to be faithful to what God has begun and to achieve what God has promised. Hope begins and ends in God.

Paul, moreover, perceived Abraham as a type of Christian believer and as a model of how to think correctly about God and respond to him. We all know that Abraham's faith 'was reckoned to him as righteousness' (Gen 15,6), but Paul meditates on the second part of the citation, 'it was reckoned *to him*', extending its meaning from Abraham to every believer in God. 'But the words "it was reckoned *to him*"', were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned *to us* who believe in God who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord' (4,23-24). The importance of Paul's portrayal of Abraham, then, lies both in the description of God's gracious dealings with him, in the exposition of Abraham's act of trust in God, and in the pastoral extension of that example to all the members of his Churches. Here Paul exhorts us to think about God as Abraham did, to expect of God creative actions and deeds which undo death.

#### *Jesus's trust in God's power*

From the pages of the scriptures, Paul knows Abraham as a figure of the past. Yet there is another figure, Jesus, the story of whose death and the structure of whose faith lie close at hand to Paul. In his portrayal of Jesus' death on the cross, Paul attributes to him much the same belief in God which made Abraham a model for the Romans.

Recent New Testament studies of Paul suggest that he explicitly attributed to the crucified Jesus a distinctive posture of faith. The issue is of such importance, that I will digress to sketch the problem and its solution. Certain texts in Galatians and Romans speak of *pistis tou Christou*, which is not easily rendered into English, because the translation of the genitive *tou Christou* remains to be determined. Traditionally it has been rendered as 'faith *in* Christ', that is, belief in Jesus as God's Christ. Yet overwhelming grammatical evidence<sup>7</sup> now demands that we render it as 'the faith *of* Christ', that is, the belief which Jesus had in God, parallel to the way we speak of the 'faith *of* Abraham'.

In Galatians Paul insists that 'no one is justified by works of the law, but through the faith *of* Jesus Christ' (2,16), an interior attitude 'faith' being opposed to external actions 'works'.<sup>8</sup> Paul himself, who has been crucified with Christ, now 'lives in the flesh

by the faith *of* the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (2,20). This reading of the phrase *pistis tou Christou* has a direct bearing on how we read Paul's comments about the crucified Jesus in Romans, where Paul proclaims 'the righteousness of God which comes through the faith *of* Jesus Christ' (3,22).

We saw how Paul structured the argument in Romans by focusing on God's two attributes, just judgment and mercy, which he correlates with the history of God's relations with humanity. In creation, God showed *mercy* on us by giving us the gift of existence; the original condition of our first parents was a holy state of faith or obedience (which in Paul are virtually identical; see 1,5 and 16,26).<sup>9</sup> As 1,21-32 tells the story, however, faithfulness changed to sinful disobedience which meant a corresponding change of focus on the part of God toward humankind, from *mercy* to *just judgment*. According to Paul's version, all humanity from Adam to Christ stood under God's judgment: 'All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God' (3,22, see 3,9-18), for there was no faithfulness and no obedience. Yet God, who is always both *merciful* and *just*, manifested divine *mercy* again, and 'passed over former sins' (3,25) because one had come into the world who was again supremely faithful and obedient, that is, the Christ. Jesus is our redemption, the expiation for our sins (3,24-25) precisely because he showed God perfect faith and obedience in his death on the cross, a common motif (Phil 2,8). Paul explicitly compares Jesus's faithfulness with the disobedience of Adam, inferring that as death came through the disobedience of one patriarch of the human race, so holiness and life comes through the obedience of a second head, through Jesus (5,14-21). The broad outlines of Paul's argument, then, are clear.

<i>Event</i>	<i>Divine Attribute</i>	<i>Person</i>	<i>Attitude to God</i>
creation	mercy	Adam	faithfulness
1st sin	just judgment	Adam	disobedience
cross	mercy	Jesus	faithfulness & obedience
[parousia	mercy/just judgment	all	depending on faithfulness and obedience]

Paul, of course, does not paint the whole of the Jesus story in Romans, only one small vignette of his death on the cross which epitomizes that story and illustrates its significance for salvation history. We should look closely, then, at Christ crucified, for Paul's

argument in Romans tells us more about Jesus than the brief notice of him in 3,25 suggests.<sup>10</sup> We have already noted that Paul calls attention to Jesus's 'faith' and 'obedience', to which he credits saving significance for the whole human race (see 5,12-21).<sup>11</sup> Yet Paul implies that we can even know the structure of Jesus's faith as he died obedient to God; we can be sure of the content of that faith.

According to Romans, Jesus's faith in God is like that of Abraham, who believed that God could both create and raise the dead (4,17). Jesus, who in obedience to a just and merciful God died on a cross, believed that God would raise him from the dead.<sup>12</sup> And his faith in God-who-raises-the-dead becomes both the model of our faith as well as the cause of our salvation. Later in Romans, Paul explicitly describes the content of the Christian faith which links us to Jesus and to God: 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (10,9). The correct way of thinking about God, then, is to believe that God's will and power are to raise the dead, whether Abraham's old body, Christ crucified or us. The pattern is clear, consistent and comprehensive. Faith means trust in God who raises the dead (see also 1,4; 8,11).

*Paul's trust in God's creative power*

Despite his evident focus on trust in God-who-raises-the-dead, Paul does not drop his interest in God-who-creates, a topic which has relevance for this inquiry because of the formal structure of Abraham's faith in God in 4,17. Before we examine the texts in Romans where faith in God as creator is found, it will help us to recall the myth of creation. God created humankind 'in our image, after our likeness' (Gen 1,26-27), which in certain streams of Jewish piety was understood as deathlessness or a share in God's own imperishability:<sup>13</sup> 'God created humankind for incorruption, and made them in the image of his own eternity' (Wis 2,23). As long as Adam and Eve were sinless, that is, faithful and obedient, they were in that image, even deathless. But God had decreed, 'The day that you eat it (tree of good and evil) you shall die' (Gen 2,17; 3,3); with faithlessness, that image of God was lost (Rom 1,23; 3,23) and so came death (Gen 3,19). As long as there was faithlessness, the deathless 'image of God' remained lost; and so Paul can say, 'Death was reigning' (5,14). But Christ's faithfulness caused him to stand apart from the flood of sin, being supremely

holy because of his obedience to God (Rom 3,24-25); and because of his holiness, God justly restored Jesus's lost life. Yet Christ is not singular in this regard; like Abraham's trust in 4,23-24, his faithfulness and God's resurrection extend to all who share his relationship with God: 'If because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ' (5,17). For God raises the dead and makes of them a 'new creation'.

This elaborate scenario stands behind Paul's depiction of salvation history. First he notes that God revealed to Adam what was God's nature; 'his internal power and deity' (1,20). Yet Adam did not appreciate this 'image' of God in which he was created, for he 'exchanged the glory of the *immortal* God for images of *mortal* man or birds or animals or reptiles' (1,23). Losing faith in the creator God who made him in his immortal image and likeness, that is deathlessness, he put faith in creatures who share the mortal image of death and corruption.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, in Christ God has worked a new Genesis in the raising up of a new Adam, a new creation, which implies that the myth of 'image/likeness = deathless' is once more operative. Paul works cautiously with the precise timing of this new creation, evidently avoiding the excesses of an overly realized eschatology, such as was the case in Corinth, where some believed that they had *already* been swept into the resurrection and the new creation. In Christ something has indeed already happened: 'Buried with him in baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life' (6,4). In that baptism, God put the Spirit within us, which Spirit is the power of resurrection or imperishable life. In the case of Jesus, Paul states that he is 'Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead' (1,4); and of us Paul comments,

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you (8,11).

Made holy by God's holy Spirit, we are restored to the image of the original Adam, in whom God had also breathed the Spirit of life (Gen 2,7).



Yet the story is far from over, for while God's power works in us by the gift of the Spirit, we await the fulfillment of God's plan, the final conquest of sin and death. We await the new creation at the end of the age. And so, Paul depicts the goal of our Christian future: 'The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God' (8,19), which is surely expectation of God's *mercy*. In the past, creation experienced primarily God's *just judgment* because it was 'subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope' (8,20). Yet balancing God's *judgment was mercy*, for creation was subject 'in hope', that is, in expectation that God would eventually act in *mercy* to restore creation to holiness and deathlessness. So Paul continues: 'Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' (8,21). What could be clearer: our 'hope' in God means freedom from 'its bondage to decay', that is, death's corruption. 'In *this hope* we were saved' (8,24), a hope which we do not now see, but for which we wait with patience. We believe, then, that God not only raises the dead, but will act again as creator to restore us fully to the image and likeness of God, which will mean our deathlessness. Like Abraham, then, we trust in God both to make a new creation and to raise the dead.

### *Conclusions*

In a sense 'hope' in Romans is synonymous with 'faith', so that all statements about the 'faith of Abraham', for example, are statements about 'hope' as well (eg 4,18-21). Hope, moreover, is personal: we hope in a person who has asked us to believe certain things about himself, that is, that God is merciful and powerful. Hope, moreover, is expectation of God's unchanging constancy. Since God has shown mercy to sinners, we hope that God will always show mercy, even when we must face God as our just judge.

Hope is transtemporal: we hope that God who acted in the past, either to create us deathless or to redeem us in mercy, will act in the future in the same way. Our hope for the future, then, is based precisely on what we know God has done in the past. Although we hope for 'what we do not see', we are not ignorant of that for which we hope (8,24-25). We trust that God will be faithful.

Fundamentally we hope against death. God desired to be trusted by Abraham, Jesus and us as God-who-raises-the-dead. Inasmuch

as God the creator made humankind deathless in the divine image and likeness, so God will act in the new creation to raise the dead and restore them to that image. We know, moreover, the content of hope from the examples of Abraham and Jesus.

Finally, hope requires a mystery, a scenario of cosmic history, a large canvas which can contextualize our individual stories. Hope must know of creation and new creation; it depends on the knowledge of God's ancient intentions and powers. Hope too requires models, such as Abraham and especially Jesus. Hope expects that history will repeat itself.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Nils Dahl, 'The neglected factor in New Testament theology', *Reflection* 73 (1975) pp 5-8 and 'The One God of Jews and Gentiles', *Studies in Paul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), pp 178-191.

<sup>2</sup> This is especially noted by Halvor Moxnes, *Theology in conflict: studies in Paul's understanding of God in Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> See Nils Dahl, 'A synopsis of Romans 5,1-11 and 8,1-39', *Studies in Paul*, pp 88-90.

<sup>4</sup> See Moxnes, *Theology in conflict*, pp 216-223, 231-282.

<sup>5</sup> See Alan Segal and Nils Dahl, 'Philo and the rabbis on the names of God', *Journal for the study of Judaism* 9 (1978), pp 1-28; Moxnes, *Theology in conflict*, pp 231-282; I have developed this understanding of God's two powers apropos of Jesus's equality with God in "'My Lord and My God': the divinity of Jesus in John's Gospel', *Society of biblical literature seminar papers* 1986, pp 156-158.

<sup>6</sup> See Harry Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1948), I, pp 218-225.

<sup>7</sup> See George Howard, 'The "Faith of Christ"', *Expository Times* 85, (1973-74) pp 212-215. See also D. W. B. Robinson, "'Faith of Jesus Christ"—A New Testament Debate', *Reformed theological review* 29 (1970), pp 71-81; George Howard, 'Notes and observations on the "Faith of Christ"', *Harvard theological review* 60 (1967), pp 459-465; and Richard Hays, *The faith of Jesus Christ* (Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1983), pp 157-176.

<sup>8</sup> See George Howard, *Paul: crisis in Galatia* (Cambridge: University Press, 1979), pp 54-65.

<sup>9</sup> See Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), pp 314-318; and Marcus Barth, 'The faith of the Messiah', *Heythrop Journal* 10 (1969), pp 366.

<sup>10</sup> See Luke T. Johnson, 'Romans 3, 21-26 and the faith of Christ', *Catholic biblical quarterly* 44 (1982), pp 77-90.

<sup>11</sup> For the saving significance of Jesus's faith in the Lukan presentation of the crucifixion, see my *The Passion according to Luke* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp 184-192.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 146-154.

<sup>13</sup> In particular, see Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, 'Christological anthropology in Phil II, 6-11', *Revue biblique* 83 (1976), pp 32-36, 39-42.

<sup>14</sup> On the Genesis imagery in Romans 1, see N. Hyldahl, 'A reminiscence of the Old Testament at Romans 1, 23', *New Testament studies* 2 (1956), pp 285-288; M. Hooker, 'Adam in Romans 1', *New Testament studies* 6 (1960), pp 297-396.