

Exegetical Analysis — Romans 4:13

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13 – For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. (13. Οὐ γὰρ διὰ νόμου ἡ ἐπαγγελία τῷ Ἀβραὰμ ἡ τῷ σπέρματι αὐτοῦ, τὸ κληρονόμον αὐτὸν εἶναι κόσμου, ἀλλὰ διὰ δικαιοσύνης πίστεως)

Before we begin analyzing this passage it is best that we try to understand what Paul is speaking about from the context. A few questions that must be asked are: *What is the “promise to Abraham”?* *Who is the “he”?* *What does it mean to be “heir of the world”?* *How does this relate to faith?* The flow of the passage is a continuous emphasis on justification by faith alone, and not by means of works (v.1-8), not by circumcision (v.9-12), and not by the law (v.13-22).

So, first, let's ask ourselves what the promise (ἐπαγγελία) is?

We can see that Paul starts off with “for” (γὰρ) at the beginning of the passage. This conjunction links us to the previous comments and should not be isolated from the context. We know then that Paul must be relating the promise to faith in something, but what faith is he referring to, and in what? We are going to need to look at the context to evaluate the key to the passage.

Let's skip down to (v.17-18):

Romans 4:17-18 NASB

(as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. [18] In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE."

Paul makes two crucial points just a couple verses after he tells us that a promise was made to Abraham. The promises here refer to the fact that 1) *Abraham would be the father of many nations* and 2) *that he would have innumerable descendants*.

“Abraham believed God’s “promise,” hundreds of years prior to the giving of the Law, therefore Abraham was justified by faith. This flow of thought will be extremely important for understanding Rom 4:13 because the content of the promise that Abraham believed must be truth that was revealed to him. Those who argue that the “promise” in Romans 4 is an expanded worldwide land inheritance (which was never promised to Abraham in the OT) thus have an immediate problem: How can Abraham have believed in a truth that was never revealed to

him?”¹

Next we need to understand who the “he” is referring to, and what the antecedent is? Some scholars take the “he” to be referring to Christ, and that may make sense in another context like Galatians 3:16, but it really has no flow in the passage. Christ isn’t mentioned until (v.24). So, it is best to understand the antecedent as *Abraham*.

So, we now know that Abraham would be an heir of the world. Much disagreement exists surrounding what it means to be an heir of the world. Paul uses the word (κόσμος) here which is quite open ended in the Greek. The word (κόσμος) can mean physical earth, or people who inhabit the world. However, if Paul wanted to point to the land, he would have used the Greek word (γῆ) to narrow in on the land, but he leaves it open ended, which leads us to believe this passage had no relation to the land.

“My point is that if Paul had used γῆ in Rom 4:13, he would clearly be referring to the inheriting of land. But because he uses κόσμος, his meaning is open to interpretation and we cannot immediately assume that κόσμος refers to land. Abraham’s inheritance could be land, but it could also be people.”²

“We cannot exclude from the scope of this promise, as defined by the apostle, the most inclusive messianic purport. It is defined as the promise to Abraham that HE should be [sic] the heir of the world, but it is also a promise to his seed and, therefore, can hardly involve anything less than the worldwide dominion promised to Christ and to the spiritual seed of Abraham in him. It is a promise that receives its ultimate fulfillment in the consummated order of the new heavens and the new earth.”³

“The Greek word for “world” here is “*kosmos*”... but its sense “merges into that of the nations of the world”...as found in such passages as Genesis 12:1-3, 15:3-5, 17:2-7, 18:18 and 22:17-18. These passages are not the same as the ones in which it is promised that Avraham and his descendants would inherit the Land of Israel (Genesis 12:7, 13:14-17, 15:7-21, 17:7-8, 24:7): when the New Testament wishes to refer to the Land, it uses the word “*gē*” (see Mt 5:5N and JNT Introduction Section VI, last paragraph.”⁴

“The promise of the land is also related to the apostle Paul’s teaching that Abraham and his descendants “received the promise that he would be heir of the world” (Ro 4:13). This universal range is not found in the Old Testament promise, which did not extend beyond the land for the nation of Israel... However, the Old Testament teaching of the universality of blessing contained in the promise to Abraham, along with the predicted worldwide extent of the reign of the Messiah, lead easily to this conclusion.”⁵

¹ Nelson S. Hsieh, *Abraham as “Heir of the World”: Does Romans 4:13 Expand the Old Testament Abrahamic Land Promises?* Ph.D. Candidate, MSJ 26/1 (Spring 2015), 99.

² Ibid., 108.

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), 1p. 142.

⁴ David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, (Messianic Jewish Publishers, Clarksville, MD), 354-355.

⁵ Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology*, 51.

“It is incorrect to suggest from Gen 12:1 and Rom 4:13 that “the land promises of the old covenant are consistently and deliberately expanded in the New Testament to show the universal dominion of Jesus.” That Abraham would be “the heir of the world” was not the expansion but the fulfillment of that which was originally promised, namely that “all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3).”⁶

“Bailey is right in seeing the universal dimension of the land. However, it seems to us that this universality or this global vision for the children of Abraham has existed since the birth of the Abrahamic promises (Gen 12:3; 22:17). The biblical data demonstrates that the concept of the borders of the land has been fluid since its inception, and that God wanted to reach to the ends of the earth.”⁷

Paul quotes very specific passages from the Old Testament that *exclude* the land. Had Paul wanted to discuss the *land as the inheritance*, he would have quoted (Gen 12:7; 13:15; 17:8). Paul quotes from two old testament passages that speak of worldwide descendants.

A] *Genesis 15:5 NASB*

And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

A] *Romans 4:18 NASB*

In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "So SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE."

B] *Genesis 17:5 NASB*

"No longer shall your name be called Abram, But your name shall be Abraham; For I have made you the father of a multitude of nations.

B] *Romans 4:17 NASB*

(as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

“Thus, “heir of the world” describes the fact that Abraham, though initially childless, would eventually inherit the world in the sense of becoming the father of innumerable persons from all the nations of the world. Though initially childless, Abraham would beget a worldwide family that he could truly call his own, i.e. his inheritance.”⁸

Paul makes it clear that Abraham's justification was based on his faith in the two promises, and these were concrete truths that he could believe in. If the argument here is to try and defend the expansion of the land, we run into a huge problem. It leaves Abraham with no revealed truth to

⁶ Barry E. Horner, *Future Israel: Why Christian Anti-Judaism Must Be Challenged*, NAC Studies in Bible & Theology, (B&H Academic, Nashville, Tennessee, n.d.), 75.

⁷ Yohanna Katanacho, *The Land of Christ: A Palestinian Cry*, (Bethlehem Bible College, 2012), 88-89.

⁸ Nelson S. Hsieh, *Abraham as "Heir of the World": Does Romans 4:13 Expand the Old Testament Abrahamic Land Promises?* Ph.D. Candidate, MSJ 26/1 (Spring 2015), 108.

believe in, since Abraham wasn't told that he would inherit the entire territory of the world.

"But if the promise that Abraham must believe is the promise of inheriting the entire physical world, it would have been impossible for him to believe since such a promise was never revealed to him in the OT. Thus, it would be impossible for Abraham to be justified by faith, undermining Paul's entire point in Romans 4. A person can only believe truth that God has revealed."⁹

We can then conclude then the following:

Romans 4:13 NASB

For the promise [*a) that Abraham would be the father of many nations and b) that Abraham would have innumerable descendants*] to Abraham or to his descendants that he [*Abraham*] would be heir of the world [*inheriting many nations*] was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith [*justified by believing the 2 promises above*].

Because Abraham had faith in these promises, he was justified.

Romans 4:22 NASB

Therefore it WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

⁹ Ibid., 107.