

# Exegetical Brief: What Did Abraham Receive *κατὰ σάρκα*?

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There are a number of textual, syntactical, and exegetical questions that combine to make the first verse of Romans 4 something of an interpreter's thicket. There is first of all the matter of what text is to be read. Basically, four readings have been preserved in the manuscript evidence.

The editors of the UBS 4th edition and the Nestle 26th edition have opted for:

Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν εὐρηκέναι Ἀβραὰμ τὸν προπάτορα ἡμῶν κατὰ σάρκα;

A slight variation on that reading is the one that has the simple *πατέρα* rather than *προπάτορα*—"father" rather than "forefather." A third possibility also utilizes the shorter *πατέρα* but switches the word order: Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν Ἀβραὰμ τὸν πατέρα ἡμῶν εὐρηκέναι κατὰ σάρκα;

The manuscript evidence for these three readings is fairly evenly divided. All of the readings are genuinely early, with the manuscript evidence for the third reading being perhaps a bit more widely spread than the other two. (The first reading is largely dependent on Alexandrian manuscripts; the second has strong Byzantine support, whereas the third has both Alexandrian and Byzantine support, reinforced by a strong presence also in the manuscripts from the Western, i.e., Latin, church.)

If we choose the third reading, we are committed to *πατέρα* rather than *προπάτορα*. It is noteworthy that the term *προπάτωρ* is found only here in Romans and once in the Septuagint. Hence, there are those who argue that the less common term *προπάτωρ* is to be preferred. Their logic is that it would be more likely for the common word to be substituted for the less common form than the other way around. While logic certainly allows that possibility, assuming that the change was intentional, yet the bulk of all the evidence makes it evident that the shorter *πατέρα* was much the preferred term over the ages. Fine-tooth combing aside, all three of the readings will yield a translation something like: "What are we to say our (fore)father Abraham discovered or received?"

The fourth textual variant takes a somewhat different turn. Basically supported only by the Alexandrian uncial B, this reading omits the perfect infinitive *εὐρηκέναι*. Hence this reading would be translated: "What then are we to say about our forefather Abraham?" Although genuinely ancient, this reading's lack of wide distribution in the ancient church rules it out as a serious contender for inclusion as the preferred text.

From a syntactical point of view, the first three readings would all seem to give a translation such as: "What are we to say that our father Abraham discovered or received?" Lenski is a minority voice challenging such a translation. With his customary forcefulness he cites "the commonest of rules in the Greek that infinitives take their subject from what precedes" (*Romans* commentary, p. 281). Instead of having Abraham as the subject of the infinitive, he retains the previous "we" as the subject and makes Abraham the object. He suggests the translation: "What, then, shall we say? That we have found Abraham (to be) our forefather (only) according to the flesh?" World Publishing's translation, entitled *God's Word*, handles the verse in a somewhat similar way, rendering it: "What can we say that we have discovered about our ancestor Abraham?"

While such a translation is undoubtedly grammatically possible, it does not seem to be the logical way of advancing Paul's argument in this section. For that we need to bring into the picture the closing phrase of this verse, namely, Paul's qualifier *κατὰ σάρκα*.

As a generalization it is safe to say that a highly-inflected language such as Greek is not heavily dependent on word order for its meaning. We noted in connection with the three variant readings of our present

verse that the translation of all three would be substantially the same in spite of the inverted placement of the infinitive *εὐρηκέναι*. There is, however, one rather standard exception to the low priority we have given the role of word order. That exception is that the positions of emphasis in a Greek sentence are either at the beginning or at the end of the sentence. In the sentence we are considering, the emphatic position of *κατὰ σάρκα* at the end of the sentence should not be overlooked.

Many translators and commentators bury the phrase by simply joining it with *πατέρα* or *προπάτωρ*, rendering it: "What shall we say that Abraham, our (fore)father *according to the flesh*, received?" The NIV resorts to the vague rendering, "What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered *in this matter*?" While it is true that Abraham can properly be described as the physical father of Paul and his Jewish countrymen, that hardly seems to be a helpful or necessary piece of information in this setting which speaks of what Abraham received.

But someone may ask, "Does this sentence really speak of what Abraham *received*? Doesn't the verb *εὐρίσκω* have the basic meaning "to find" or "to discover"? Granted, that is the most common meaning of this verb, but there are numerous contexts where it very clearly conveys the sense of "to receive" or "to obtain." For example, the angel Gabriel calms Mary with the assurance, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found (i.e., obtained) favor with God" (Lk 1:30). Perhaps an even more compelling example can be seen in Hebrews 4:16 where receiving and finding are placed next to each other as parallel activities. There we hear the author urge the Hebrews, "Let us approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive (*λάβωμεν*) mercy and find (*εὐρωμεν*) grace to help us in our time of need." Similar instances of *εὐρίσκω* with the sense of "obtain" occur in such passages as Matthew 10:39; 11:29; 16:25; Acts 7:46a; 2 Timothy 1:18, and others.

Assuming then that *εὐρίσκω* is here legitimately rendered as "received," we should still note, however, that in the final analysis the nub of the discussion in this section is not a question as to what Abraham received. Everybody knew what Abraham had received. He received righteousness from God. He is in heaven (John 8:56, Luke 16:22). The question is rather: how did he obtain the blessed state that is assumed for him? Did he obtain it by something he did? Did it come to him as the result of some natural power or personal prowess? In other words, did he receive it *κατὰ σάρκα*, according to the flesh?

That *κατὰ σάρκα* is the focal point of this verse is, however, not deduced solely from word order, i.e., from its periodic position in the sentence. The context also strongly supports that emphasis, for this verse (4:1) sits squarely between two sections that sternly warn against boasting in human accomplishment.

Verses 27 and 28 of the previous chapter assert: "Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law."

What is asserted in those verses is then tested against the case of Abraham. He, if anyone, the "friend of God," might be expected to have contributed in some way to the blessed state he now enjoys. But what does Paul say? "If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but *not before God*" (4:2). Even if Abraham might seem to surpass others and have something to boast of before men, that carries no weight at all with God. For what does the Scripture, God's Word, say in Genesis 15:6? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."

What did Abraham receive *κατὰ σάρκα*, by his own power? Absolutely nothing of spiritual value! To be sure, Abraham had "flesh" (*σάρξ*) and occasionally we see that *σάρξ* asserting itself in the life and conduct of the patriarch. The results, however, were never a positive contribution or of spiritual value. We need only think of the sorry attempt on Abraham's part to help God's plan and promise along by having a son with his servant girl Hagar. But that son Ishmael, whom Paul describes as "the one who was born *κατὰ σάρκα* of the servant girl" (Ga 4:23), later persecuted the promised son Isaac and had to be driven out (Ge 21:8-14; Ga 4:29,30).

No, Abraham did not receive anything good *κατὰ σάρκα*, by his own natural powers, but with him, as with everyone since, salvation was by faith in what God in Christ had done for him. The timeless words of the prophet Jeremiah (9:24), twice repeated by Paul to the Corinthians, remain sound advice: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord" (1 Co 1:31; 2 Co 10:17).