

## Item #12

In my previous website, “James Swetnam’s Close Readings”, I published two “Entries”, Entry #8 and Entry #41, both about Romans 4,12. I publish them here basically unchanged, and with a certain amount of hesitation, which includes a willingness to be corrected.

### Entry #8

#### Romans 4,12.

In 1980 I published an article in *Biblica* about Rom 4,12 in which I defended the manuscript reading in which the word τοῖς is found before the word στοιχοῦσιν. I was defending a position taken previously by L. Cerfaux and J. Cambier, but with added argumentation on my part. In his Anchor Bible commentary on Romans (pp. 381-382) J. A. Fitzmyer adopts our position.

The conventional interpretation has vv. 11bc-12 referring to two groups of Christians. In v. 11bc the Christians are those who have faith without having been circumcised, i.e., those who come to the Christian faith as Gentiles. In v. 12 the Christians are those who have been circumcised, i.e., who come to the Christian faith as Jews. The New American Bible translation is based on this interpretation:

**4,11bc** Thus he was to be the father of all the uncircumcised who believe, so that to them [also] righteousness might be credited, **4,12** as well as the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised, but also follow the faith that our father Abraham walked while still uncircumcised.

This interpretation is straightforward and easily grasped. Abraham was justified before he was circumcised (cf. the use of Genesis 15,6 at Romans 4,3 and Romans 4,9). Therefore he is the father of all those who are justified without ever being physically circumcised (4,11bc). But he is also father of those who have been physically circumcised and who have been justified by faith alone as he was (4,12). It involves placing considerable weight on the position of the word τοῖς before οὐκ in v. 4,12a and not after it. It also involves a certain minimizing of the word τοῖς before στοιχοῦσιν.

Looking back on the 1980 article I still think that v. 12 involves two groups, i.e., for me the argument based on the presence of the article τοῖς before στοιχοῦσιν is decisive. But I think that the explanation of the nature of the two groups needs reassessment. This must be done in the explicit context of v. 11, for it is clear from the use of the word “father” (πατήρ) that v. 11 is closely connected with v. 12 and hence the two verses are intended by Paul to be mutually relevant and hence mutually intelligible. Such a reassessment would go as follows:

In v. 11 Abraham is “father” of all those who believe with no involvement of spiritual circumcision, i.e., baptism (cf. Rom 2,28-29 and Col, 2,8-13); in v. 12 Abraham is “father” for all those who believe with involvement of spiritual circumcision. V. 11, then, is speaking of all men who come to believe but who do not become Christians. V. 12 is speaking of all men who come to believe and who do become Christian.

V. 12a is speaking of those who come to Christianity from Judaism, whereas v. 12b is speaking of those who do not come to Christianity from Judaism. Thus there is no

reference in v. 12 to Abraham's fatherhood of Jews inasmuch as they are physically circumcised: such a fatherhood is obvious and, in any case, irrelevant for Paul. What is relevant is the faith that justifies, and this can be reached by those who believe with no reference to Christ and by those who do believe with reference to Christ. (What, concretely, this faith is which saves but which has no reference to Christ needs explanation, obviously, but such an explanation is outside the scope of this note. It should be noted, though, that Hebrews 11,6 speaks of such a faith.)

V. 12a is speaking of those Jews who become Christian; v. 12b is speaking of non-Jews who become Christian. Both groups are "spiritually circumcised", i.e., have received baptism.

In the context of this presentation of Abraham's "fatherhood" Paul is not interested in those Jews who do not come to the Christian faith. The entire context of Romans shows that these Jews are immensely important to Paul and to God as Paul understands him. But they have absented themselves from the three groups which come under the headings mentioned above for vv. 11-12.

The vexed problem of the apparently odd placement of τοῖς in the phrase τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον would seem best addressed by viewing the present order of words as chosen to convey the idea that not all the circumcised Jews are meant (such a meaning would demand the word order οὐκ τοῖς ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον), but only a group of them, i.e., those who have come to believe in Jesus Christ and who accordingly have been baptized.

If the above exegesis can be sustained it would shed considerable light on salvation "outside the Church". (4 January 2009)

(Cf. now **Entry #41: More Thoughts Regarding Romans 4,11-12**)

### **Entry #41 – Additional Clarification Regarding Romans 4,12**

In late 2009 I submitted an article to *Biblica* in which I modified my views of Rom 4,12 as I had presented in an article in *Biblica* published in 1980. (Cf. Bibliography #79 for 1980 article.) (In Entry #8 below on my web site I presented a summary of the modifications presented in the 2009 submission to *Biblica*.) In December 2011 the 2009 submission was rejected on the grounds that it simply repeated what I had said in the article in *Biblica* published in 1980. This is not true. But the mistake on the part of the editors of *Biblica* is my fault because I did not make crystal clear the difference. I present the rejected article below. But before I do I present the difference between the 1980 article and the rejected article as clearly as I can. I make no claim that my view of Rom 4,11-12 given below is new or unique. I have not read all relevant literature on the subject. (I doubt if anyone has.) But to my knowledge my view is new and unique. I would gladly stand corrected by anyone who can furnish information that my interpretation of Rom 4,11-12 has already been presented elsewhere.

Here is an overview of the positions:

*Conventional Interpretation:*

Rom 4,11: Abraham is the father of the uncircumcised, i.e., all those who believe without having been physically circumcised.

Rom 4,12: Abraham is the father of the circumcised, i.e., all those who believe having been physically circumcised.

*Swetnam's Interpretation in 1980 Biblical Article (following L. Cerfaux and J. Cambier):*

Rom 4,11: Abraham is the father of all the uncircumcised who believe in Christ, i.e., all those who believe in Christ without having been physically circumcised.

Rom 4,12: Abraham is the father of all the circumcised (spiritually circumcised):

- a) those who believe in Christ who come from the physical circumcision,
- b) those who believe in Christ who do not come from the physical circumcision.

Thus v. 11 and v. 12b are really the same group but presented under two different formalities.

*Swetnam's Interpretation in the Article Rejected in 2011:*

Rom 4,11: Abraham is the father of all the uncircumcised who believe, i.e., all those who are justified without belief in Christ and without having been physically circumcised.

Rom 4,12: Abraham is the father of all the circumcised (spiritually circumcised):

- a) those who believe in Christ who come from the physical circumcision,
- b) those who believe in Christ who do not come from the physical circumcision.

Thus v. 11 and v. 12b are distinct groups. V. 11 is about those who are justified without faith in Christ, and v. 12 is about those who are justified with faith in Christ, both those who have been physically circumcised and those who have not.

The rejected article:

Τοῦς in Romans 4,12

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**T**he word τοῦς occurs three times in Romans 4,12. One of these

occurrences is rather straightforward and can easily be understood. The other two uses are challenging, but an understanding of them in the context of the entire epistle seems to lead to an exegesis which puts Abraham in a new light.

### *The Problem*

Abraham is called “father” in Rom 4,11 on the basis of what is presented in that verse, and “father” in Rom 4,12 on the basis of what is presented there. Thus there is an implied parallelism of some sort between the two verses, which suggests mutual relevance and hence a mutually interlocking intelligibility. Thus, to be adequately understood, 4,12 must be placed in the context of 4,11.

καὶ σημεῖον ἔλαβεν περιτομῆς σφραγίδα τῆς  
δικαιοσύνης τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐν τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ, εἰς τὸ  
εἶναι αὐτὸν πατέρα πάντων τῶν πιστευόντων δι'  
ἀκροβυστίας, εἰς τὸ λογισθῆναι [καὶ] αὐτοῖς [τὴν]  
δικαιοσύνην, καὶ πατέρα περιτομῆς τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ  
περιτομῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν τοῖς  
ἔχουσιν ἢ ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ πίστεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν  
Ἀβραάμ.<sup>1</sup>

The word τοῖς in the phrase τοῖς ἔχουσιν is unexceptionable and presents no difficulty to the understanding. The word τοῖς in the phrases τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον and τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν, on the other hand, are much discussed. Depending on the way they are interpreted, radically different interpretations are possible.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Text after N-A<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> An indication of how fraught with problems is the interpretation of the τοῖς of τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν may be seen from the way it is handled by two different and prestigious authorities:

1) “**12.** . . . As it stands the art. is a solecism: it would make those who are circumcised one set of persons and those who follow the example of Abraham’s faith another distinct set, which is certainly not St. Paul’s meaning. He is speaking of Jews who are both circumcised *and* believe” (W. Sanday – A.C. Headlam (ICC; Edinburgh 1908), 108. Presumably the certitude on display here about Paul’s intended meaning comes from the context.

2) “Es gibt ... Fälle wo die Wiederholung des Artikels mißverständlich sein kann, so Röm 4,12 τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν (zwei Personengruppen, aber nur die Judenchristen sind gemeint, so daß man vermuten kann, daß καὶ τοῖς für καὶ αὐτοῖς [„auch ihrerseits“] steht)” (F. BLASS / A. DEBRUNNER, *Grammatik des neutestamentlichen Griechisch*. Bearbeitet von F. REHKOPF [Göttingen 1976], §276.2 [p. 227]). Again, certitude about Paul’s meaning seems to come from the context and not from v. 12 itself.

The present writer attempted to come to grips with Rom 4,12 in a note published in *Biblica* in 1980.<sup>3</sup> In this 1980 note emphasis was placed on the τοῖς of τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν so that two distinct groups of persons were envisioned in v. 12: Christians who come from the Jews and thus who have been physically circumcised (v. 12a) and Christians who come from the Gentiles and thus who have not been physically circumcised (v. 12b). The present note continues to maintain this view, but adds further considerations from the entire epistle, which put v. 12 and the two groups it represents in a different context.

### *Three Possible Interpretations*

Attempts to interpret Rom 4,12 as regards the number and identity of the groups being discussed have resulted in three distinct interpretations.<sup>4</sup>

Interpretation #1 centers on the repetition of τοῖς in the phrases τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς and τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν. The resulting emphasis on the τοῖς of τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν would seem to indicate that for Paul a new group is being indicated, different from the group indicated in the phrase τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον.<sup>5</sup> A translation of Rom 4,12 would accordingly run as follows:

... and father of circumcision for those not only from the circumcision but also for the ones walking in the file of the faith of the uncircumcision of our father Abraham.<sup>6</sup>

In this interpretation the word περιτομή (“circumcision”) in v. 12 has two different meanings. In the first occurrence, in the phrase καὶ πατέρα περιτομῆς, the word is to be understood as referring to “spiritual” circumcision. The way for this meaning has

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<sup>3</sup> J. SWETNAM, “The Curious Crux at Romans 4,12”, *Bib* 61 (1980) 110-115.

<sup>4</sup> This three-fold presentation of the positions with regard to Rom 4,12 is found in a recent detailed treatment of Chapter 4 of Romans: P. BASTA, *Abramo in Romani 4. L'analogia dell'agire divino nella ricerca esegetica di Paolo* (AnBib 168; Roma 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. BASTA, *Abramo*, 215-216. The present writer is an advocate of this view, as explained above. Cf. Swetnam, “Curious Crux”, 111-113.

<sup>6</sup> The translation is by the present writer and is deliberately non-idiomatically literal.

been prepared in Romans in Rom 2,28-29 and has a pedigree going back deep in the Old Testament, where it was known as “circumcision of the heart”.<sup>7</sup> In the New Testament this metaphor is continued,<sup>8</sup> and it takes on an external, cultic connotation for it is identified with Christian baptism.<sup>9</sup> Thus in 4,12 the first occurrence of περιτομή is plausibly to be taken as referring to Christian baptism: Abraham is being portrayed as the father of Christians who receive baptism as an outward sign of their justification just as Abraham received physical circumcision as an outward sign of his justification.<sup>10</sup> The second περιτομή is to be taken as referring to physical circumcision and, just as in Rom 4,9, as an abstract term used to represent a concrete group by metonymy, i.e., the Jews.<sup>11</sup> The Christians being mentioned are “the ones” (τοῖς) from the group of the physically circumcised—the Jews—who have become Christians. The second part of the verse, τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν τοῖς ἔχνεσιν τῆς ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ πίστεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ, refers to those Christians who do not come from the Jews but who have become Christians without being physically circumcised, as Abraham was when he believed before accepting circumcision as a sign of this belief.

Interpretation #2 understands v. 12 as referring to only one group, the group of Jewish Christians.<sup>12</sup> The principal argument in favor of this view focuses on the use of τοῖς in the phrase τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς. Supporters of this exegesis maintain that the occurrence of τοῖς before the οὐκ in the phrase τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον and not after it is intelligible only on the basis of an interpretation that one group is involved, not two. And this group consists of Jewish Christians. The translation as this

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Lev 26,41; Deut 10,16; Jer 4,4; 9,24; Ez 44,7.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Phil 3,3; Col 2,11; Rom 2,28-29.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Col 2,11-12.

<sup>10</sup> For Paul physical circumcision, apart from its value as a sign (Rom 4,11), is of no real importance for the Christian (Rom 2,28-29).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rom 3,30 and 15,8.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. BASTA, *Abramo*, 216-217.

interpretation understands the Greek text would run as follows:

... and father of circumcision not only for those being from the circumcision but also walking in the file of the faith of the non-circumcision of our father Abraham.

Interpretation #3 also sees only one group as being referred to in v. 12, but this group is composed of Jews who are both circumcised physically and believe as Abraham did, not Jewish Christians.<sup>13</sup> This view minimizes the importance of the word τοῖς in the phrase τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν and maximizes the importance of τοῖς in the phrase οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον. Further, the reasoning of Paul in 4,9-12 involves the delineation of two groups, Gentiles in v. 11b and Jews in 12. Both are being considered from the standpoint of justification by faith. Further, the fact that the Gentiles are presented before the Jews should not be interpreted as an indication that Paul valued Gentiles more than Jews. The emphasis is on faith, and this equalizes the two groups, independently of whether the sign of circumcision is involved or not. A translation of this interpretation would presumably be basically the same as for interpretation #2:

... and father of circumcision not only for those being from the circumcision but also walking in the file of the faith of the non-circumcision of our father Abraham.

#### *A Re-thinking of Interpretation #1*

The problems involved in interpreting Rom 4,12 are not easily addressed, much less solved. Thus it is with a certain amount of hesitation that the following considerations are advanced in support of Interpretation #1 as given above. These considerations are advanced with the intention of putting the problematic of the crux on a broader basis.

Rom 4,11-12 comes at the conclusion of a discussion of faith in Rom 4,1-10. In this section Paul discusses justification by faith apart from explicit faith in Christ.<sup>14</sup> A defense of Interpretation #3 uses this fact to argue that in vv. 11-12 Paul ignores Christian faith with the result that v. 11 presents the faith of Christians and v. 12 presents the faith of Jews. Both have this element in common, that they are justified by faith independently of works.<sup>15</sup> Thus Paul is defending Jewish faith as well as Christian

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. BASTA, *Abramo*, 217-218.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. BASTA, *Romani*, 217. Of course this discussion of an apparently “abstract” faith not centered on Christ in the context of a writing dedicated to the centrality of Jesus Christ in the history of salvation programmed by God poses a real problem. In the opinion of the present writer this problem is solvable, but not in the limited context of this note.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. BASTA, *Romani*, 217-218.

faith, with both being considered as parallel in the sense that they are not the result of works.

This interpretation makes sense but only on the supposition that Paul is leaving out of consideration a considerable portion of humanity: those Gentiles who have not and will never come to belief in Christ. In preparing for Chapter 4 Paul makes no distinction between Gentiles and Jews in 3,27-31. In Rom 3,21-26 he emphasizes the importance of faith in Jesus Christ, but this is in the avowedly limited context of a contrast between faith and Law. In 3,27-31 Paul prepares the way for a broader consideration that will involve the example of Abraham. Once the faith of Abraham is explicitly mentioned, not only is there implicitly no mention of the Mosaic Law, but there is implicitly no mention of faith in Jesus Christ either.<sup>16</sup> It is this discussion of a faith independent of both the Mosaic Law and of Jesus Christ that seems to culminate in Rom 4,11-12, and hence in this context that the conundrum posed by Rom 4,11-12 must be addressed. In the context of faith independent of the Mosaic Law and of Christianity it would seem that there are three groups of mankind which must be taken into consideration if the fatherhood of Abraham is to be understood in all its potential fullness: 1) those persons who will never have any explicit relation with faith in Jesus Christ or in anything related to the Mosaic Law; 2) those persons who have come to Christian faith from Judaism; 3) those persons who have come to Christian faith independently of Judaism. There is, of course, a fourth group: those who have faith related to the Mosaic Law but who have declined faith in Jesus Christ. (Paul dedicates much space to them in Romans, and is much concerned for them; but they do not seem to figure in Rom 4,11-12). Taken together the three groups represent all mankind with the above-mentioned exception of Jews who did not believe in Christ. In the opinion of the present writer, Paul uses Rom 4,11-12 and the example of Abraham's faith and circumcision to speak of Abraham's fatherhood of all of humanity.

In v. 11 Abraham receives physical circumcision as a sign of faith which he had received in the context of non-circumcision and this physical circumcision serves as a visible attestation of the justification which he had received previous to physical circumcision and hence independently of it. This attestation of justification independent of physical circumcision serves as a witness to the justification of all men who believe but whose justification will never be attested by circumcision. In this way Abraham is the "father" of the uncircumcised: they believed just as he did, independently of any rite of external attestation.

In v. 12 Abraham is presented as "father" of the "circumcision" (περιτομή). That Paul was aware that in a very true sense Abraham was the "father" of all those who were physically circumcised hardly needs seconding, and this "fatherhood" of Abraham is not being presented here. Rom 4,12 is an appeal to Abraham as an example of the primacy of faith over rite in the acquiring of justification; the evocation of Abraham as being the "father" of Jews insofar as he was physically circumcised would have been an exercise in irrelevancy for Paul, however much he was convinced that being a circumcised Jew was not without its advantages. Abraham's physical fatherhood of the Jews is for Paul here a non-question. He is interested in Abraham as father in the context of faith as gift. Hence considerations antecedent to Rom 4,12 argue for a meaning for the first occurrence of περιτομή in v. 12 different from physical circumcision. After arguing in v. 11 that physical circumcision was irrelevant in the causing of justification Paul could hardly have used physical circumcision in v. 12 as the basis for the causing of justification. Thus v. 11 forces a "spiritual" interpretation onto the word περιτομή in v. 12a as the basis for Paul's fatherhood in the entire verse. (The way for this has been prepared in Romans in Chapter 2,28-29, as mentioned above.) This spiritual interpretation for περιτομή in turn forces the second

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<sup>16</sup> Paul apparently thinks that the references to Gen 15,6 at Rom 4,3.9 are sufficient to remind the reader of what that Abrahamic faith consisted in. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews is more explicit about Abrahamic faith and even about faith before Abraham (cf. Heb 11).



occurrence of περιτομή in v. 12a to take on a meaning different from the “spiritual” circumcision of the first περιτομή in v. 12a, also as explained above in outlining Interpretation #1.

The presence of the unusual word order which places the τοῖς of τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς μόνον before the οὐκ and not after would seem to be explained by the need to avoid the phrase τοῖς ἐκ περιτομῆς, an order of words which implies that the group being referred to is co-extensive with all physically circumcised Jews. The phrase τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς, in other words, suggests that the preposition ἐκ conveys a partitive idea, whereas οὐκ τοῖς ἐκ περιτομῆς suggests apposition.

What is happening in v. 12, then, is that Abraham is not only father of those not associated with an external sign that they have been justified (v. 11), but is father of those who are so associated through baptism, both those who come from the ranks of the physically circumcised (v. 12a) and those who come from the ranks of the non-physically circumcised (v. 12b). Thus Abraham is “father” (in the sense that he is being imitated in various phases of his life of faith) of the justified of all mankind, of both those who are justified without an external sign of justification and those who are justified with such a sign. An appropriate translation would run somewhat as follows:

**4,11** And he [sc., Abraham] received a sign of circumcision as a seal of the justification of faith achieved in non-circumcision, in order that he be father of all those who believe through non-circumcision in order that [the] justification be reckoned [even] to them, **4,12** and father of circumcision for those not from circumcision only but also for those walking in the file of the faith in non-circumcision of our father Abraham.

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The present note has attempted to support the conclusion of a previous article on Rom 4,12. That article maintained that Paul in 4,12 is speaking of two groups: a) Christians who come to faith in Christ from the ranks of the physically circumcised Jews (4,12a) and b) Christians who come to faith in Christ from the ranks of the non-Jews, i.e., the Gentiles, who have never been physically circumcised but who come to faith in Christ as Abraham did, without being physically circumcised, and for whom Christian baptism is a sign which seals their Christian faith just as Abraham’s physical circumcision is a sign of his Abramic faith. V. 11 is about Gentiles who never become Christian and who will never receive Christian baptism, but have come to faith as Abraham did, without benefit of any external sign of this faith. Thus Abraham is “father” of all Gentiles who believe as he did without reference to any external sign of this belief, and “father” as well of all who believe as he did (in Christ) with reference to an external sign of this belief, i.e., baptized Christian Jews and baptized Christian Gentiles. The problematic article τοῖς in the phrase τοῖς οὐκ ἐκ περιτομῆς is explained as being placed where it is to indicate that the Christians in question are only

part of the Jewish people from whom they come and not the whole, which the phrasing οὐκ τοῖς ἐκ περιτομῆς would tend to suggest.

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## SUMMARY

The note suggests that the two problematic uses of the article τοῖς in Rom 4,12 are best approached by a consideration of the general and particular context. As a result, v. 11 is about Abraham as father of Gentiles who will never receive Christian baptism, but have come to faith as Abraham did, without benefit of any external sign of this faith (πατέρα πάντων τῶν πιστευόντων δι' ἀκροβυστίας). In v. 12 Abraham is father as well of all who believe as he did with the benefit of an external sign (baptism) of this belief, i.e., baptized Christian Jews (πατέρα περιτομῆς τοῖς ἐκ ... περιτομῆς) and baptized Christian Gentiles (τοῖς στοιχοῦσιν τοῖς ἴχνεσιν τῆς ἐν ἀκροβυστία