



## Does Faith Matter?

### The Ancient Jewish Debate about Faith vs. Mitzvot

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## Romans 3-4

<sup>21</sup> But now **apart from the law** the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This **righteousness is given through faith in<sup>[h]</sup> Jesus Christ** to all who believe. **There is no difference between Jew and Gentile,** <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,<sup>[i]</sup> **through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.** He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— <sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

<sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? **The law that requires works?** No, because of the law that requires faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, <sup>30</sup> since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. <sup>31</sup> Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

**4** What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? <sup>2</sup> If, in fact, **Abraham was justified by works,** he had something to boast about—but not before God. <sup>3</sup> What does Scripture say? **“Abraham **believed** God, **and it was credited to him as righteousness.**”<sup>[a]</sup>**

<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. <sup>5</sup> However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness. <sup>6</sup> David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the one to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:

<sup>7</sup> “Blessed are those  
whose transgressions are forgiven,  
whose sins are covered.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed is the one  
whose sin the Lord will never count against them.”<sup>[b]</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. <sup>10</sup> Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! <sup>11</sup> And he received circumcision as a sign, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. <sup>12</sup> And he is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

<sup>13</sup> It was not through the law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. <sup>14</sup> For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless, <sup>15</sup> because the law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression.

<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. <sup>17</sup> As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations."<sup>[c]</sup> He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.

<sup>18</sup> Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>19</sup> Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. <sup>20</sup> Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, <sup>21</sup> being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. <sup>22</sup> This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." <sup>23</sup> The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, <sup>24</sup> but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. <sup>25</sup> He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

## James 2

<sup>14</sup> What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? <sup>15</sup> Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup> If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup> In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

<sup>18</sup> But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by my deeds. <sup>19</sup> You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.

<sup>20</sup> You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless<sup>[d]</sup>? <sup>21</sup> Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? <sup>22</sup> You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. <sup>23</sup> And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness,"<sup>[e]</sup> and he was called God's friend. <sup>24</sup> You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone.

<sup>25</sup> In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? <sup>26</sup> As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

## Midrash Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael

(Exodus 12:6) "And it shall be to you for a keeping": Why does the taking of the Pesach precede its slaughtering by four days? R. Matia b. Charash says: It is written (Ezekiel 16:8) "And I passed by you and I saw you, and behold, your time was the time for love": There had arrived the (time for the fulfillment of the) oath that the Holy One Blessed be He had sworn to our father Abraham to redeem his children. **But they had no mitzvot to engage in, which would enable their redemption,** viz. (Ibid. 7) "Your breasts were firm and your hair had sprouted, but

you were naked and bare" (of mitzvot).” And the Holy One Blessed be He gave them two mitzvot — the blood of the Paschal lamb and the blood of circumcision to engage in for their redemption. Thus (Ibid. 6) "And I passed by you and I saw you steeped in your blood, **and I said to you, in your blood live, and I said to you, in your blood live.**" And it is written (Zechariah 9:11) "You, too — By the blood of your covenant I have sent forth your bound ones from the waterless pit." Therefore, the Holy One Blessed be He commanded the taking of the Pesach four days before its slaughtering, **for reward is given only for the act.** R. Eliezer Hakappar Berebbi says: Did Israel not have four mitzvot surpassing the worth of all the world? — not being suspect of illicit relations or of slander, not changing their names and not changing their language?...

And why did the taking of the Pesach precede its slaughtering by four days? Because Israel was steeped in idolatry in Egypt, **which countervails all of the mitzvot**, as it is written (Numbers 15:24) "And if from the eyes of the congregation it (idolatry) were done unwittingly, etc." Scripture singled out this (idolatry, as tantamount to transgression of all of the mitzvot [viz. Ibid. 22]). He said to them (viz. Exodus 12:21) "Withdraw" from idolatry and cleave to mitzvot. R. Yehudah b. Bethaira says: It is written (Exodus 6:9) "And they would not hearken to Moses (as to G d's delivering them), for shortness of spirit, etc." Now is there anyone who is given **glad tidings** and does not rejoice? (viz. Jeremiah 20:14) "**A son has been born to you — Rejoice him!**" **His Master is freeing him from bondage and he does not rejoice?** What, then, is the intent of "And they would not hearken to Moses, etc."? It was difficult for them to abandon their idolatry, viz. (Ezekiel 20:7) "And I said to them (in Egypt): Let every man cast away the detestations of his eyes and not defile himself with the idols of Egypt." This is the intent of (Exodus 6:13) "And the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, and He charged them to the children of Israel. He charged them to abandon idolatry.