What did Abraham find - Rom 4:1

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This verse has been cited as an example of the challenges of exegesis and Bible translation, so I thought it would be helpful to approach the question of accuracy in translation and some of the linguistic and theological assumptions we bring to a text by looking at the verse in some detail.

Step 1: Deciding on the Greek text.

There are several differences in the textual tradition, but let me limit myself to the two major competing ones:

NA: Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν εὑρηκέναι Ἀβραὰμ τὸν προπάτορα ἡμῶν κατὰ σάρκα;

Byz: Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν Ἀβραὰμ τὸν πατέρα ἡμῶν εὑρηκέναι κατὰ σάρκα;

My focus here is not textual criticism, so I won't go into the reasons for my conclusion that the NA is most likely to represent the original text, and therefore is the text I as a translator shall work from. In this case, however, there is no significant difference in meaning between the two text options.

Step 2: What does this text mean?

A very literal word-for-word rendering (which I would not call a translation) is: What then shall-we-say to-have-found Abraham the forefather of-us according-to flesh?

Few people would call this an accurate translation because it violates the grammar and usage of the English language. It is at one extreme end of the translation spectrum. In fact, one should never first make a literal rendering into another language and then base one's exegesis on that literal rendering. Rather, we need to look carefully at the Greek text in its context before even attempting a translation.

The sentence is a rhetorical question of the kind that I call a pedagogical question. Its function is to introduce the topic of how Abraham came to be considered a person whom God could accept in the sense that he did what was good in the eyes of God. In theological jargon: How was he justified? The translator needs to consider whether the target language prefers to use a question or a statement to introduce a new topic. It is possible that in some languages it would be better to start off with: "Let me take our forefather Abraham as an example. What was his experience?" This is somewhat similar to what the Good News Bible (GNB) and the New Living Translation (NLT) have done.
GNB: What shall we say, then, of Abraham, the father of our race? What was his experience?
NLT1996: Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What were

his experiences concerning this question of being saved by faith?
NLT2004: Abraham was, humanly speaking, the founder of our Jewish nation. What did he discover about being made right with God?

The discourse connector is οὖν. It links the preceding verse(s) to the new topic that Paul is introducing. It basically denotes consequence, but here it is not a logical consequence, but rather the next step in the argumentation. Therefore "therefore" is not appropriate as a translation, but "then"as in GNB is fine as most English versions have. A few like NLT have made it implicit, since English is a language (and culture) with assumes linear and rational progression of thoughts – unlike Hebrew. Both options are acceptable.

The main verb is "we-shall-say". The "we" is a pedagogical "we" which goes well with the pedagogical question. The purpose is to include the hearer/reader in the thinking process. If the pedagogical question is kept in translation, the "we" can probably also be kept. If not, it may be better to use "I". Some languages distinguish an inclusive "we" referring to speaker and addressee and an exclusive "we" referring to the speaker and associates but excluding the hearer. This means that the translator needs to make a decision about which form to choose.

The verb "to say" often has a content clause which in Greek sometimes is indicated grammatically by an accusative with infinitive. This is the case here. In this content clause, Abraham is the subject and "to have found" is the corresponding verb.

Richard Hays has suggested that a possible translation is: "What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham (to be) our forefather according to the flesh?"[1] However, this does not make sense and is hardly a possible rendering of the Greek text. His arguments for this peculiar exegesis are unconvincing. N.T. Wright followed Hays down this wrong path, and he says in his book *Justification*: "The following translation, which works extremely well with the Greek text, brings this out: "What then shall we say? Have we found Abraham to be our forefather according to the flesh."[2] The truth is that *it does not work at all* with the Greek text and the translation misrepresents the meaning of the original Greek.

The verb in the content clause has the basic sense of "find", but it is often used in the extended sense of "discover, consider, experience". The most literal versions like the KJV tend to be consistent in translating the same Greek word with the same English word. Some people consider this a mark of accuracy, but in fact it is based on a lack of understanding of how language and communication works. It is a betrayal of basic communication principles.

The subject Abraham has an apposition "our forefather according to flesh". A common contrast in the words of Paul is between the spiritual (PNEUMA) and the non-spiritual (SARKS-flesh). However, the non-spiritual has two different senses or applications: The physical or the ungodly. In this context, the sense is the physical. This is mirrored in another contrast that is common in the words of Jesus, Luke and Paul, namely the physical "sons of

Abraham" and the spiritual "sons of Abraham". All Jews consider themselves to be physical descendants of Abraham. He is their forefather, progenitor, founding father, "according to the flesh". All believers in Jesus are considered in the NT to be the spiritual "sons and daughters of Abraham" (Lk 3:8, 13:16, 19:9, Rom 9:8, Gal 3:7 etc.). Paul is in Rom 4:1 speaking as a Jew to other Jews who have a high regard for the patriarch Abraham as the founding father and prime example of a person of faith. It is an opinion they share, whether they believe in Jesus or not. So, Paul is creating rapport with his audience.

How to translate "according to flesh" depends on our translation philosophy. Those who see translation as a springboard to the original words for those who do not know Greek, will prefer to keep the literal "flesh" even though it is not how anyone would ever say that in normal English. Those who prefer a meaning-based translation that follows normal translation principles, will use a word like "physical" or they may decide to make it implicit in "forefather" as the NIV has done. In translation, you do NOT need to translate every word as long as the meaning is clearly communicated by other words. The word "forefather" implies physical descent. NLT uses "humanly speaking" which I consider an inappropriate carry-over from the Living Bible.

In our meaning-based Danish translation we said: "Hvordan blev så Abraham, vores stamfar, accepteret af Gud? \v 2 Hvis det var på grund af hans gode gerninger, så ville han have haft noget at rose sig af, dog ikke over for Gud. \v 3 Men nu siger Skriften: „Abraham troede på Gud, og derfor blev han accepteret."

In English: "How then was our forefather Abraham accepted by God? \v 2 If it was on the basis of his good deeds, then he would have reason to boast, although not in front of God. \v 3 But the Scriptures say: "Abraham believed in God, and that is why he was accepted."

NOTES

1. Page 81 in Richard B. Hays: "Have We Found Abraham to Be Our Forefather According to the Flesh?" A Reconsideration of Rom 4:1. Novum Testamentum, Vol. 27, Fasc. 1 (Jan., 1985), pp. 76-98. ↩
2. Tom Wright (2009:193). Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision. SPCK. ↩