

The Message of Romans

by J.K. McKee posted 21 April, 2009 www.tnnonline.net

It is not at all difficult for a Bible reader to see how Romans can be classified as the most influential letter ever written in human history. Romans certainly stands as the single longest, most detailed, and most eloquent of the Pauline Epistles. *It is the Apostle Paul's magnum opus.* But Romans also possesses a long history of interpretation that has not only affected how theologians have developed doctrines such as justification by faith or the role of sanctification, but how their thoughts have in turn affected contemporary philosophies and governmental structures for the past 2,000 years. As an undergraduate political science student in 2001, I recall having to examine how parts of Romans affected John Calvin's theology, which in turn affected the Protestant Reformation and the growth of Western European democracy. Yet we need not digress too much about the long-lasting affects of Romans...

Our interest in the Epistle to the Romans should be focused on how we understand the text as a whole, and specifically for how it may affect us as the emerging Messianic movement. Romans teaches us important things about the relationship of Jew and non-Jew in the Body of Messiah, and some of the ancient factionalism, divisions, and pride that the Apostle Paul wanted to see jettisoned from among the Roman Believers. How does he address parts of his letter to the Jewish Believers in Rome, and address parts of it to the non-Jewish Believers in Rome? Today's Messianics frequently have questions and criticisms lodged at them from Romans about their Torah observant convictions, many of which can be easily addressed if we read Romans closely and not try to rush through. None of us needs to be criticized from a letter that is actually not too difficult to understand. We need to see Paul's message of how all are sinners in the eyes of God, that any unnecessary divisions present among His people should be removed, and that all Believers are interdependent and must rely on one another.

Have we ever sat down as Messianics and read what Romans was as a First Century letter, written to a specific ancient audience, with a specific purpose? What kind of observations should we make from reading the letter? What kind of intertextuality is seen in Romans, with quotations and appeals made to the Tanach (i.e., Psalms, Isaiah, Deuteronomy)? What did the letter ask its ancient recipients? What does the letter ask us today? What is the message of Romans?

Much unlike his earlier letter of Galatians, Paul's letter to the Romans was written to a group of people whom he had never met. The good Apostle entrusted the epistle to "our sister Phoebe" (16:1-2), who would not only transport the letter to the Roman Believers and their assemblies, but be able to assist all the brothers and sisters (16:3-16) who would hear it and perhaps need clarifications. (We would certainly all like to know her explanations of Paul's letter!) It is rightfully thought that Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans as a letter of self-promotion, as his ministry work in the Eastern Mediterranean had relatively ended (15:19-20), and it was now time to begin ministry work in the Western Mediterranean (15:23-24, 28). Paul would need a base of operations and support, much like Antioch or Ephesus had served him in the East, and so Rome with a large Jewish population and community of Believers was an obvious choice (15:29) for the West. Yet, the Roman Believers—although having heard of Paul—would need to know some things about him *and his teachings*, presented in a series of vignettes **This is one of the major reasons why Romans is so detailed among the Pauline letters.**

The opening chapters of the Epistle to the Romans speak in theological generalities, which give us a significant view into how the Apostle Paul approached the world around him. Paul asserts his apostleship as originating from God (1:1), the gospel of Yeshua the Messiah as being deeply rooted in the Tanach Scriptures (1:2), that Yeshua is the expected Deliverer of Israel (1:3-4), and that the Messiah's arrival necessitates Paul "to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (1:5), something that included the Romans (1:6-7). Paul eagerly desires to visit the Roman Believers (1:8-12), expressing how "I planned many times to come to you...in order that I might have a harvest among you" (1:13). Now, the time for his going to Rome to proclaim the gospel and instruct the Believers had come (1:14-15), as Paul expresses "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who

believes" (1:16). The significance of the gospel is seen in that it is "a righteousness from God," as faith in God is to dictate how the redeemed live their lives (cf. Habakkuk 2:4).

Where does the gospel begin for Paul? It begins in understanding the reality of human sin from which *all suffer*. The Creator God has revealed Himself to all of mankind via His handiwork, causing all people to be "without excuse" (1:18-20). In spite of the goodness of God, though, humanity at large "neither glorified God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened" (1:21). Instead of expressing worship and thanks to God, idolatry prevailed (1:22-23, 25). Consequently in rejecting Him, God gave the nations over to "the sinful desires of their hearts," notably including "sexual impurity" (1:24) and homosexuality (1:26-27). Paul's line of reasoning in describing the gross sins committed (1:28-32) was quite consistent with common Jewish views of the day, which depicted the Gentiles as little more than sexually immoral idolaters (Wisdom of Solomon 14:12; *Testament of Naphtali* 3:4; Psalm 106:20).

Even though the nations will be condemned by God for these gross sins, this does not mean that people who know (of) God and His righteousness—Paul's own Jewish brethren—will not likewise be held accountable, and that they somehow get a free pass. "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (2:1). These words indicate that some of the Jewish people have dabbled in the same gross sins at one point in their lives. Harsh judgment of others—a job reserved for the Almighty—will only be a self-condemning exercise (2:2-3). As terrible as sin may be, it is "God's kindness [which] leads you to repentance" (2:4). Regardless of whether a person is a Jew or not, the unrepentant will be justly punished by God for their sins (2:5-11; cf. Psalm 62:12).

Those who are outside a life of Torah, total pagans, and those inside a life of Torah, here most specifically the Jewish people, will be judged (2:12).¹ Those who possess and know the Torah are to adhere to its standard of righteousness (2:13). This is because those who have God's Torah and follow it will be held to a much higher standard than those who do not, intensifying the need for any of the Jewish Believers in Rome to be careful in their condemnation of others. Paul reminds the Romans how that nations "who do not have the law," can still "do by nature the things required by the law" because the Creator God has given them a conscience, with "their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (2:14-15). Many things will be revealed on the day of God's judgment that are likely to surprise more than a few of the Jewish Believers in His dealings with the nations (2:16). Some of the nations—people once perceived as totally lost pagans—may be considered worthy of entering into His restored Kingdom by having accepted Him via His natural revelation (cf. 1:19-20). And some of the Jewish people, having once condemned all such people as worthless barbarians, may not enter. *This is why Paul designates all of this as "the secret thoughts of all" (2:16, NRSV).*

Paul explains how the Jewish people, who in his day were the prime owners of God's Torah, have an extreme responsibility placed upon them (2:17-29). He asks, "if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?" (2:19-21a). Those who teach from God's Torah cannot act as though the Torah's standard of holiness does not apply to themselves as well (2:21b-22), as he asks "You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?" (2:23). It can be easy to forget some of the Torah's significant imperatives, and while possessing the Torah actually be found to be breaking it. This is why Paul appealed to Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:20: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

In the First Century, possession of God's Torah had become a source of great pride for many of the Jewish people—and Jewish possession of the Torah had caused many to forget that the Torah equally condemned *all as sinners* before Him. Paul reminds the Romans, "Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had

¹ Note that the clause *en nomō*, appearing in 2:12, is correctly rendered as "in law."

not been circumcised" (2:25). Those who are uncircumcised, yet keep the things that those who are circumcised have broken, are as though they have been circumcised (2:26-27). Physical circumcision to the Jewish person is to remind him of the need to be circumcised of heart (2:28), because "Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God" (2:29).

While Paul wants the Jewish Believers in Rome to realize that their Jewish pedigree does not grant them special favors on judgment day, this by no means makes him a turncoat Jew. He does not think that the Jewish people somehow do not possess a great value and calling by God. Paul writes, "What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way!" (3:1-2a). Even "if some did not have faith," this does not by any means "nullify God's faithfulness" (3:2b-3; cf. Psalm 116:11; 51:4), as His promises and faithful actions remain secure. God called Paul's Jewish brethren and remained faithful to them. Yet God is not unjust in judging His own chosen people for their sin, because if He were "how could God [then] judge the world?" (3:5-6). *All are human and subject to the penalties of sin.* And, simply because the faithlessness of people can enhance God's faithfulness and truth, does not all of a sudden mean that sinners will not be punished by Him as faithless people are used to accomplish His tasks (3:7-8).

For Paul, the fact that "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin [*hup hamartian*]" (3:9) is something that the Tanach gives ample testimony to (3:10-18; cf. Psalm 14:1-4; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; 36:1). The Torah speaks to those who are in it (*en tō nomō*), with the specific reason "so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (3:19), indicating that the entire human race—Jewish and non-Jewish people alike—will somehow be punished for their violation of it. The intention for God giving the Torah not only to the Jewish people, but for the world, is not so that it would be turned into "works of the Law" or some kind of sectarian identity barriers (3:20a, NASU; 4QMMT), but "rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" (3:20b).

In Romans 3:21 Paul asserts, "now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known." Here, it is best for us to understand righteousness (Heb. *tzedaqah*; Grk. *dikaiosunē*) in its sense of pertaining to God's vindication and saving activity. (In this context, righteousness would not be dissimilar from the Psalmist's cry, "Answer me when I call to you, O my righteous God. Give me relief from my distress" [Psalm 4:1].) God's righteousness has been made known in something apart from the story of the Torah—which up to this point would have largely been defined for the Jewish people in terms of the Exodus from Egypt—although Paul is *very clear* that such a righteous event is something "to which the Law and the Prophets testify" (3:21b). It is "a righteousness that comes from God, through the faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah" (3:22a, CJB), meaning the faithful actions of Yeshua to die on the cross for our sins (3:25-26), prophesied and attested by the Tanach Scriptures (cf. 1:2). This is something available "to all who believe," because as Paul says, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23).

Boasting, because all have sinned, is something that is not possible (3:27). One's identity is not to be found in sectarian-defined "works of the Law" (3:28), but instead a person placing his or her trust in the actions accomplished by the Lord. "Works of the Law," which either marked out ancient Jewish sects and denominations or defined their *halachah*, is not what is to justify people and mark them as members of God's people. Rather, the faithfulness of Yeshua at Golgotha is to mark them, as "there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised and the uncircumcised through that same faith" (3:30).³ Yet the Apostle Paul made it clear that God's Torah was not all of a sudden unimportant: "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law" (3:31), in light of the faithfulness of Yeshua which we are to surely strive to emulate.

Paul found it necessary to remind the Jewish Believers in Rome about the life of Abraham, specifying how Abraham was justified not in the actions he performed, but rather from his faith and steadfast trust in God (4:1-3; cf. Genesis 15:6). One's righteousness before God is not to be given to him as wages due a paid laborer (4:4), but the one who is forgiven from sin because

² Grk. *dia pisteōs Iēsou Christou*; "the faith of Jesus Christ" (YLT).

³ For a further discussion, consult the editor's article "What Are 'Works of the Law?'"

of faith placed in Him (4:5-8; cf. Psalm 32:1-2). The status of being forgiven of one's transgressions is available for anyone, whether circumcised or uncircumcised, because Abraham was considered righteous before being given the covenant of circumcision (4:9-10). At a later time as Abraham continued in God's covenant with him, he was then circumcised (4:11), being the patriarch of both uncircumcised and circumcised (4:12). *Trust in the unseen God preceded any other action*, as God's blessing of Abraham came because of his faith in Him (4:13). Such a promise—the promise of the Messiah to come—is brought by faith, because the purpose of God's Torah is to principally define human sin and transgression (4:14-15).

Paul teaches how the promise of the Messiah “comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all of Abraham's offspring” (4:16)—all in the Body of Messiah (4:16b) who are connected to Abraham in many different ways (Galatians 3:29; Genesis 17:5). It comes to the Jew who already possesses God's Torah, but also to the non-Jew who begins his faith by emulating the example of Abraham (4:17a). This promise comes from a great and powerful God “who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were” (4:17b). Via Abraham's steadfast trust he saw Isaac conceived (4:18-20), “being fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised,” and “This is why ‘it was credited to him as righteousness’” (4:21, 22; Genesis 15:6). Paul says that all are affected by Abraham's model of faith (4:23), because just as Abraham had to believe that the child of promise would come forth from Sarah and he, so must Believers in the Messiah “believe in him who raised Yeshua our Lord from the dead” (4:24), being the Source of our justification (4:25).

What has the justification—forgiveness of sins and identity—brought? “[W]e have peace with God through our Lord Yeshua the Messiah, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (5:1b-2). The faith that we now place in the work of the Lord Yeshua gives us the perseverance that a Believer needs to endure the trials of life (5:3-4), and it includes God's love made manifest to us via the presence of His Holy Spirit (5:5). Yeshua, unlike any other person, died for the ungodly (5:6-8). Yeshua's sacrifice assures a person deliverance from God's wrath, and complete reconciliation with Him (5:9-11).

If the Jewish Believers in Rome had not yet been convinced that *as far as sin goes*, they were no better off than the pagans around them—Paul's comments about Adam would have been most direct: “[S]in entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (5:12).⁴ Here, there is no kind of delineation between Jewish sin and everyone else's sin. Paul's remark that follows, though, can be a bit confusing to understand, as he actually says “for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law” (5:13). This would be speaking of a condition prior to Mount Sinai, where instructions regulating the atonement and punishment of sin were finally delivered and codified (Galatians 3:19). Prior to Mount Sinai, while such sins existed, there was no definite way to account for all of them, even though “death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses” (5:14), because high sins will inevitably have their negative affects made manifest in one way or another (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5).

If all human beings are affected by the sin of Adam, then “how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Yeshua the Messiah, overflow to the many!” (5:15). Yeshua is compared to being a Second Adam—One without sin who came to resolve the human sin problem. Paul tells the Romans, “For if, by the trespass of one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Yeshua the Messiah” (5:17). The faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah is exemplified by Paul, as “through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (5:19). When the Torah was given by God to Israel, trespasses inevitably increased (5:20a). “But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring

⁴ Do note how the text says that via the sin of Adam, death spread *eis pantas anthrōpous* or “to all humans” that would follow. Adam and Eve's sin only affected the human race, which means that possible animal death (present in the geological record) before their Fall is something a bit different.

eternal life through Yeshua the Messiah our Lord” (5:20b-21). The Torah came to regulate sin and define God’s standard of holiness, so that the final atonement via the Lord Yeshua could be made manifest.

Paul is very clear to answer any potential objections that the Romans may ask, especially in his assertion that while human sin increased, God’s grace also increased. “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer” (6:1-2). The Believer who has been transformed by the gospel, having been immersed in water, is to be identified in Yeshua’s death, burial, and resurrection—specifically so that “we...may live a new life” (6:3-4). The kind of “death” that Believers have experienced is one of death to sin and its hold (6:5-6), “because anyone who has died has been freed from sin” (6:7). We are called to emulate the Messiah, who died for us and rose again, and who modeled the life of sinlessness that we are to emulate (6:8-10). Paul summarizes, “In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Messiah Yeshua” (6:11), as people are to “not offer the parts of [their] bod[ies] to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but...to God, as those who have been brought from death to life” (6:12-13).

Paul qualifies the status of a redeemed person by stating, “sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace” (6:14). When sin is a person’s lord and owner, such a status results in one being “under law.” When one has been reconciled to God through Yeshua, the contrasting status is one being “under grace.” People who are “under law” stand judged by God’s Torah and subject to its penalties. **People who are “under grace” stand forgiven before God.**

Paul anticipates how some may ask, “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” (6:15). If the penalties of God’s Torah have been removed for the redeemed, would it not be possible to then sin and not worry about it? Paul properly answers, “By no means! Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves as someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (6:15-16). When the Roman Believers were “under law” they were also “slaves to sin” (6:17). But being redeemed, they were “set free from sin and” became “slaves to righteousness” (6:18). *And notably, being “under grace” here does include obedience to God!* Paul’s analogy to slavery in comparing the status of non-Believers “under law” and Believers “under grace” is described as being “human terms” (6:19-22), something that he would obviously expect the Jewish Believers in Rome to understand, but more specifically the non-Jewish Believers (who could very likely have included many people from the slave class).

Paul’s teaching in Romans 7 is likely the most confusing and/or difficult part of the letter for today’s Messianics to understand, often because it is interpreted from an inappropriate anti-Torah bias. Paul is very clear in the offset, “for I am speaking to men who know the law” (7:1a), yet too frequently knowing *something* about the Torah’s instructions does not often play a role in how contemporary interpreters view his words. Having just described the death of Believers to sin, Paul asserts, “that the law has authority over [lords it over, LITV] a man as long as he lives” (7:1b). Depicting the Torah as a master *over* a person, existence “under law” (cf. 6:14-14) or being subject to its harsh condemnation is in view. Redeemed individuals have died to sin, and the authority of the Torah to condemn is something that they have been released from.

To illustrate this important point, the Apostle Paul makes use of the Torah’s regulations regarding marriage. He says, “by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage” (7:2). *This is not the Torah as a whole*, but rather demonstrates how a particular part of its instructions become non-applicable. The “law of marriage” is being compared to the condemnation of the Torah upon sinners, and its subsequent death penalty.

The married woman would be an adulteress if she took another man, but she would not be an adulteress if she remarried as a widow (7:3). In a similar way, Paul can say, “So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Messiah”—an obvious reference to His crucifixion for sin—“that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead” (7:4). Paul does

not say that Believers have died to the standard of God's holiness in His Law, but rather that the Torah as a harsh, condemning overlord to sinners is what Believers have been made dead to. This was a life controlled by sinful passions, and "by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit" (7:5-6). This new way causes us to properly "uphold the law" (3:31) as a part of the New Covenant brought by God's Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 36:26-27).

Paul by no means associates God's Torah and human sin as being synonymous, anticipating that some might conclude he associates a life controlled by sin to be a life controlled by the Torah. To this he asserts, "What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not!" (7:7a).

From 7:7b-8:1 we see a variety of "I" statements made regarding the role of God's Law. Many Romans interpreters naturally read this as some kind of autobiographical summary and/or personal confessions made by Paul. Many others, though, have come to think of this "I" as a hypothetical sinner, with the Apostle Paul employing an ancient form of rhetoric such as *prosopopeia*.⁵ (I too am personally inclined to think that Paul is *not* speaking of himself.) We must notably recognize that the sin problem targeted here is covetousness (7:8; Exodus 20:17; Deuteronomy 5:21), but Paul's principal sin problem was actually murder (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:23). Furthermore, Paul will later admonish the Romans to overcome evil (12:21), yet the sinner depicted in this section still struggles with sin (7:17-20). Surely, the status of a person struggling with sin on the way to salvation, or a new Believer still maturing in faith yet giving himself an excuse to sin, should give us enough reason to reassess whether Paul is really speaking about himself here, as the great Apostle would actually portray himself as spiritually immature.

This "I" sinner testifies how sin is shown to be sin via God's Torah, and in being shown to be sin, sin can take advantage of a situation (7:7-8). In the case of the covetous person, "Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (7:9). Disobedience to God's Law brings an existence of death and condemnation. The sinner discovers "that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (7:10), *not* because of the commandment, but because of sin (7:11). Paul is very clear to specify how "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (7:12), yet how "through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful" (7:13). God's Torah provides a clear standard of righteousness that exposes sin to be the problem that it truly is.

This "I" sinner further states how "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave of sin" (7:14). He is conflicted, doing disobedient things he does not want to do, and not doing the obedient things that he wants to do (7:14-15)—all the while recognizing "that the law is good" (7:16). The presence of sin in his life causes disobedience to God's Torah (7:17-20). The principle at work for this person is, "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war" (7:21-23). The question that this "I" sinner asks is, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (7:24). All he can answer to this is, "Thanks be to God—through Yeshua the Messiah our Lord!" (7:25).

Yeshua provides the answer to the conflicted sinner, a person who wants to obey God, but not quite able to do so (7:25b). *The person feels continually condemned*, but is able to come to the point where "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Yeshua, because through Messiah Yeshua the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death" (8:1-2). Not infrequently, the usage of *nomos* or "law" can be viewed as akin to "principle," which would not at all be inappropriate—yet another way of looking at this would be God's Torah guided by His Spirit, set against God's Torah in conflict with a sinner's fallen nature. Either way we look at it, "what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature,

⁵ For a summary of this, consult J.M. Everts, "Conversion and Call of Paul," in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 158.

Do note that while many Romans commentators today recognize the strong possibility that the "I" in Romans 7 is not Paul speaking about himself, there are many different conclusions drawn as to what is being specifically communicated if this is not autobiographical material.

God did by sending his own son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering” (8:3). The Torah on its own is clearly not enough for a person, but once atonement for sin was provided, “the righteous requirements of the law [can] be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature,” or the flesh, “but according to the Spirit” (8:4). **God’s Torah still plays a definite role for the redeemed person who acknowledges the sacrifice of Yeshua that takes away sin.**

Paul discusses what the new life guided by God’s Spirit is all about, contrasting it to the old life guided by sin (8:5-8). Most notably, “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so” (8:7). People that have been regenerated by God’s Spirit possess the ability to belong to Him, and live a life that reflects a true child of God (8:9-14). Paul tells the Romans, “you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (8:15-16), able to inherit great things (8:17). Even though there may be some temporary hardships and persecutions to experience, each Believer is a part of a great redemption to come, involving the resurrection and restoration of the Created order (8:18-25). In the meantime, “the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses” as we might find how “We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express” (8:26).

A redeemed life, while surely involving obedience to God, also involves the significant presence of His Spirit to guide and direct Believers. This enables God’s people to be overcomers and conquerors when they face challenges (8:27-37; Psalm 42:22). For Paul, “I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present time nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Messiah Yeshua our Lord” (8:37-39). **Any Believer, whether one of the Romans or someone today, must come to a similar conclusion in his or her life, confirmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit.**

For many past Romans interpreters, their engagement level with the text of Paul’s letter would significantly decrease after chapter 8, with chs. 9-16 not being given the same degree of attention as chs. 1-8. All too often, this was because the Epistle to the Romans was primarily not viewed as being a letter written to a First Century group of Believers, but instead was viewed as written primarily as a doctrinal treatise. While no one can easily deny the unique doctrinal qualities of Romans among the letters of the Pauline corpus, more modern interpreters have rightly recognized the value of chs. 9-16, and in particular what it tells us about the relationship that non-Jewish Believers have toward Israel and the Jewish people.

Romans chs. 9-11 are probably the most reviewed and considered part of Paul’s letter by today’s Messianics, precisely because they speak to the relationship of Jew and non-Jew within the Messiah’s Body, what God’s purpose was in choosing Israel, and what to do with the reality that—in Paul’s day—many Jewish people were rejecting Yeshua as the Messiah. Whereas some parts of Paul’s letter thusfar seem to be addressed more to the Jewish Believers in Rome, answering some of their possible questions and/or critiques, much of the remaining letter addresses potential questions that would be asked from the non-Jewish Believers in Rome.

The Apostle Paul expresses great distress—“great sorrow and unceasing anguish” (9:2)—because of the current condition of his own Jewish people. He actually wishes “that I myself were cursed and cut off from Messiah for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race” (9:3). He identifies them as “the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs is the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises” (9:4), also pointing out “from them is traced the human ancestry of Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised!” (9:5). While later Paul will weave in some Tanach passages, describing the greater restoration of Israel and how the salvation of the nations is involved, he notably considers his own Jewish people to constitute “Israel.” Paul recognized them as those who have been faithful to possess the gifts of God, and the Jewish people are worthy of being called “Israel” *even* with a scattered Israel out there in the nations.

The subject of the Jewish people is a difficult one for Paul. He expresses to the Romans how “It is not as though God’s word has failed,” but then observes how “not all who are descended

from Israel are Israel" (9:6), here depicting an Israel that composes *the redeemed of faith* and not just an ethnic community. He similarly states how, "Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children" (9:7), because only those who partake of God's promise—the promise of the Messiah—can be considered actual "offspring" (9:8-9), regardless of their ethnicity.

The verses that finish Romans 9 have often too largely been read through a Calvinistic grid of God choosing or electing some *individuals* for salvation, and other *individuals* for damnation. This idea would have been quite foreign to First Century Jews, who saw election more in terms of their ethnicity guaranteeing them a place in God's Kingdom (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1). A closer reading of the text shows that a *corporate* election for God's purposes is what is primarily being considered, and not how He has chosen some for condemnation, but rather how He has been merciful and patient toward His own in spite of their rebellion.

Paul discusses whether God is just to allow judgment on His people. He uses examples for the Roman Believers to seriously recognize how throughout the history of His people, it is often only been a remnant that has been faithful to Him—in spite of the larger people being chosen by Him as a conduit of His blessings. Is it fair, if Paul's own Jewish brethren have largely rejected Yeshua, for the mission given to God's people to now largely be accomplished by non-Jews (cf. 11:25-32)? Paul provides a number of examples from the Tanach for the Roman Believers to be aware of, as another stage of His plan appears to have unfolded.

Paul begins by describing how God had promised Rebekah that her older son, Esau, would serve her younger son, Jacob (9:10-13; Genesis 25:23; Malachi 1:2-3). God's choosing of the line of Jacob was "not by works" (9:12), because if it truly were then one who shortchanged his brother of his birthright, and who was a swindler and cheat, would surely not have been chosen by an impartial God. Jacob's line was, rather, the better of the two for Him to fulfill His long-term purposes. The fact that groups of people, and not the individuals Jacob and Esau, are really what is in view here, is seen by Paul's quotation of Malachi 1:2-3: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (9:13). This speaks of the people of Israel and the people of Edom, respectively.

The motif continues as the question could be asked, "Is God unjust?" (9:14). Why does it seem that some have to fall? Paul answers this by referring to what happened immediately after the Ancient Israelites worshipped the golden calf, quoting Exodus 33:19: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" (9:15). Moses intercedes for the people, after they had worshipped the golden calf, and so God says He will demonstrate a degree of mercy. Similarly, in a demonstration of His mercy (9:16), the example of Pharaoh is appealed to: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (9:17; Exodus 9:16). **The issue is God demonstrating mercy** and God hardening people (9:18) so that He might accomplish His objectives. He is not just doing it for some reason of "random choice." And, it could be observed that God's demonstration of *mercy*, rather than immediate *judgment*, is a sign of the rebellious being given a chance to repent (cf. Ephesians 2:3-4).

To further demonstrate God's mercy shown to those who are in defiance of His will, a pre-exilic example is considered. Allusions are made to God as the potter and human beings as clay (9:19-21; cf. Isaiah 29:16; 45:9; Jeremiah 18:6). Those who rebelled against Him were appropriate "objects of wrath," yet Paul previously notes that God "bore [them] with great patience" (9:22), and with the specific intent no less "to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory" (9:23). Far be it from this being a group of individuals predestined for salvation, Paul uses these references to speak to his generation and to the Romans, asserting "even us, whom he also called" (9:24a). These are people who are loyal to Him, have recognized Yeshua as Messiah, and who have thus received His mercy. Most importantly this was "not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles" (9:24b).

To this mixed group of people, Paul applies Hosea 2:23, speaking of the scattered Northern Kingdom: "I will call them 'my people' who are not my people; and I will call her 'my loved one' who is not my loved one" (9:25). *Does he apply this prophecy to non-Jewish Believers in his Roman audience*, somehow recognizing them or some of them as a part of those scattered

people? Perhaps it is best to understand this applied prophecy in a broad(er) sense as God's mercy is the prime issue, but this factor cannot be excluded. The reason it cannot be excluded is that it is coupled with two similar prophecies: Hosea 1:10 in Romans 9:26, and Isaiah 10:22-23 in Romans 9:27. The most we can say for certain is that God's mixed people of Jew and non-Jew in Messiah Yeshua is some kind of manifestation of the greater restoration of Israel foreseen by Israel's Prophets. The specifics were something God had to determine in the eschaton, but the focus of His mercy and acceptance of the people was the broad message taking root in Paul's day. The "Israel" being considered is the one determined by belief, not just ethnicity. *This did involve more than just ethnic Jews*, something that the Jewish Believers might have difficulty recognizing if not placed into some kind of prophetic expectation witnessed in the Tanach.

Why all of these complicated arguments? (And arguments surely worthy of more detailed examination.) Paul specifically wants the non-Jewish Believers in Rome to understand that **God is being very gracious to his own Jewish contemporaries who have currently rejected Yeshua**. God has shown patience and mercy to people, giving them an opportunity to repent, as He presently was doing to First Century Jews who had heard the good news and yet spurned it. Their widescale rejection of Yeshua is a major cause of the widescale non-Jewish acceptance of Him! The non-Jewish Believers in Rome need to recognize this, and not at all be prideful as a consequence of most of the Jews' problem (further discussed in ch. 11). God is not merciless to let all of Paul's Jewish brethren reject His Messiah, referring to a Kingdom of Judah that was not completely wiped out as sinful Sodom and Gomorrah were (9:29; Isaiah 1:9).

So what has been the problem with Paul's Jewish brethren, who have largely rejected Yeshua? Paul attempts to explain this to the Roman Believers. He says, "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it" (9:30-31). The righteousness that Paul's own Jewish brethren should have been naturally seeking did not find it, whereas the nations, who would not have been naturally seeking such righteousness, did find it. And the reason is, "Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works" (9:32), perhaps an echo of the misuse of the Torah into "works of law" (3:20). So, by seeking God's righteousness of their own human effort, Paul's Jewish brethren—whom he still calls "Israel" as a sign of great honor and respect—have stumbled over their own Messiah (9:33; Isaiah 10:22-23).

Primarily addressing the non-Jewish Believers in Rome, Paul tells them, "Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (10:1-3). The problem with too many of Paul's own Jewish brethren is that they sought a righteousness independent of God's righteousness, and were unable to see the Messiah when He came. Romans 10:4 can be a tough verse for many to understand, because as most Bibles render it, "Christ is the end of the law...." Many view this as God's Torah being the problem, and thus Jesus had to come and abolish it. Yet this does not fit the context of the passage very well, because immediately prior Paul expresses how God's Torah is indeed "a law of righteousness" (9:31), something unable to be seen via human error.

So how is Romans 10:4 to be understood? Most of you probably have a footnote in your Bibles that reads something along the lines of "Or, *goal*,"⁶ expressing the fact that there is some degree of disagreement among translators as to how the verse should be translated. Many are in legitimate agreement that the Greek *telos* should be rendered as "goal," or perhaps as it is rendered in the relatively new TNIV, "culmination." This would mean then, rather than Yeshua coming as the termination of the Torah, He is "the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (10:4, TNIV).⁷

⁶ Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible*, New American Standard (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1994), 1498.

⁷ N.T. Wright actually suggests that "climax" is the best rendering for *telos* ("The Letter to the Romans," in Leander E. Keck, ed., et. al., *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 10 [Nashville: Abingdon, 2002], 658).

Romans 10:4 does not say that the Messiah terminates the Torah, but it does reaffirm that the Torah alone is not enough. Paul details how, “Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law...” (10:5; Leviticus 18:5). This is not enough, especially now that the Messiah has come. Paul uniquely considers Deuteronomy 30:12-13, where Moses admonished Ancient Israel that following God’s Torah was not to be that difficult. Yet to many Jews of his generation, the Torah was made to be too difficult, and it skewed the ability of many to see Messiah Yeshua. Such an approach can lead to people thinking that Yeshua was neither incarnated nor was He resurrected (10:6-7). On the contrary, though, if understood and followed properly—with Yeshua as the goal—then Moses’ words can be realized: “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart” (10:8a; Deuteronomy 30:14). Paul is here associating the Torah pointing to Yeshua—a message Moses seemingly proclaimed as His Teaching would point to the future Redeemer (10:4). The whole package is designated as “the word of faith we are proclaiming” (10:8b), as we should be specifically reminded of how *all are called* “to the obedience that comes from faith” (1:5). God’s Torah points to Yeshua, and salvation in Yeshua will follow with proper obedience.

This word of faith begins with acknowledging “Yeshua as Lord,”⁸ God Himself made manifest in human flesh, and that He was resurrected from the dead—providing salvation to the repentant (10:9, 13; Joel 2:23). Such a declaration for salvation is something that Believers can be confident of (10:10-11; Isaiah 28:16), and most especially for the Romans, “there is no difference between Jew and [Greek]—the same Lord is Lord of all, and richly blesses all who call on him” (10:12).

There is certainly the Biblical need for God’s chosen Jewish people to hear the message of the good news. Paul asks, “How, then can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without something preaching to them?” (10:14). Hearing the good news of God’s deliverance is something that was certainly true in the Tanach (10:15; Isaiah 52:7). Yet even when the message is declared, not all receive it, something also true in the Tanach (10:16; Isaiah 53:1). And, a great many Jews of Paul’s generation did hear the gospel message (10:18; Psalm 19:4).

The Apostle Paul very much considers his own people worthy of being called “Israel,” but is forced to recognize that in his day—especially with the widescale non-Jewish recognition of Yeshua as Messiah—that some passages seen in the Tanach were beginning to take shape. He asks, “Did Israel not understand?” To this, “Moses says ‘I will make you envious by those who are not a nation...’” (10:19; Deuteronomy 32:21). Likewise, “Isaiah boldly says, ‘I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me’” (10:20; Isaiah 65:1). God’s forbearance is seen in Isaiah’s further word, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people” (10:21; Isaiah 65:2). Apparently, Paul’s Jewish people largely rejecting the Messiah, and the message going out to those not considered a nation, was something to be expected in Israel’s Scriptures.

Yet while one could expect Paul to say that God no longer considers this chosen people of His to be important, Paul immediately steps in and stops such a thought in the Romans’ minds: “I ask them: Did not reject his people? By no means!” (11:1a). If God really did *totally reject* these people, then Paul’s own salvation would be somewhat of a contradiction (11:1b). Here, we are dealing with a corporate people’s widescale rejection of the Messiah, not Jewish individuals like Paul who have recognized Him, and were beginning to see God’s plan for the nations take shape. For Paul, his own Jewish people largely rejecting Yeshua as Messiah—but a remnant recognizing Him (11:5-6)—is no different than the seven-thousand during the time of the Prophet Elijah who did not worship Baal (11:2-4; 1 Kings 19:10, 14). The bulk of Paul’s people, having rejected Yeshua, will be “hardened”—but the ones who accept Yeshua will be “elect” (11:7-8). This is again

⁸ This is **not** just a recognition of Yeshua as “Master.” As C.E.B. Cranfield validly notes, “The usage of κύριος [*Kurios*] more than six thousand times in the LXX to represent the Tetragrammaton [YHWH] must surely be regarded of decisive importance here” (*International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* [London: T&T Clark, 1979], 529), indeed indicating that acknowledging Yeshua the Messiah as God Incarnate is required for salvation.

something consistent with God's dealings with people in the Tanach (11:8-10; Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 29:10; Psalm 69:22-23).

So are Paul's Jewish brethren, who had presently rejected Yeshua, beyond all help? Paul anticipates the non-Jewish Romans asking, "Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?" Paul answers, "Not at all!", asserting that what has happened was a part of God's plan, so "because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious" (11:11). The non-Jewish Believers have a responsibility to make the Jewish Believers—again, worthy of the designation "Israel"—"jealous" (NASU). *They have to be part of the solution to the problem.* Paul instructs, "if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!" (11:12). Even though Paul is the designated Apostle to the nations (11:13), he still very much has "the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?" (11:14-15).

As the Apostle to the nations, what role did Paul see them playing in the salvation of his own Jewish people? He expresses how "If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches" (11:16). What follows is an analogy of Israel to an olive tree, a metaphor from the Tanach (Jeremiah 11:16), and the people who make up this olive tree being considered branches (11:17-24).

It is important to note that the branches of this olive tree *are holy* (11:16), and Paul says "If some of the branches have been broken off"—holy branches nonetheless—"and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others"—non-Jewish Believers—"and now share in the nourishing sap...do not boast over those branches" (11:17-18a). The Jewish people who have rejected Messiah Yeshua are still to be considered chosen of God, and cannot be shown any dishonor or disrespect, as non-Jewish Believers were grafted in to *their olive tree* of Israel. And, even though considered "wild" to some degree, these non-Jewish Believers are still *olives*, not another species of plant, making them a part of Israel.⁹

The Apostle Paul wanted the non-Jewish Believers in Rome to very clearly know that they had no business boasting over the significant misfortune that many of his Jewish brethren had rejected Yeshua. He instructed, "You do not support the root"—that is, the root of Israel—"but the root supports you" (11:18b). He anticipates some saying, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." He answers, "Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either" (11:19-21). If God is willing to break off the natural Jewish branches of Israel's olive tree, **He will surely be willing to break off prideful and arrogant grafted-in branches of the nations!** Paul urges the non-Jewish Believers in Rome to consider God's kindness and sternness (11:22), urging them to consider how necessary it is that natural branches be re-grafted back "into their own olive tree" (11:23-24).

So what is happening, from Paul's vantage point? He writes the Romans, "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you will not be conceited" (11:25a). This is directed toward the non-Jewish Believers, and the role that they play in Israel's grand salvation. The NIV (and similarly other versions) says "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (11:25b). Some conclude that this is speaking of a set, predestined number of non-Jewish people for salvation, and once this number is reached, then final salvation will come to the Jewish people. Another way of looking at *to plērōma tōn ethnōn* is as "the fullness of the Gentiles" (NASU) or nations, speaking of a spiritual maturity for non-Jewish Believers to reach for. When they have attained this level of maturity—a **significant trajectory to reach for**—then the final grand salvation of Israel will take place. And, the closest Tanach

⁹ We should be reminded how the Torah forbids the sowing of two different kinds of seed together (Leviticus 19:19; Deuteronomy 22:2).

equivalent of *to plērōma tōn ethnōn* appears in Genesis 48:19, where the Patriarch Jacob refers to Ephraim's descendants as becoming *melo ha'goyim*.¹⁰

Having just labeled this as a “mystery” is important to grasp (11:25a), because there may be some important layers of what he expects that some Bible readers may (purposefully) overlook. He is likely—while primarily considering the *spiritual character* of the nations' salvation—once again be setting it in the context of Israel's prophesied restoration (cf. 9:25-28). Paul references critical Tanach passages that detail the Deliverer coming to Zion and the promised New Covenant, things promised to Israel that non-Jewish Believers were benefitting more from than Paul's own Jewish people (11:26-27; Isaiah 59:20; Jeremiah 31:33). **There is a responsibility that goes along with this reality.**

While Jews who reject Yeshua “are enemies” because of their rejection of the gospel, “as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs” (11:28). The Jewish people possess a calling that is irrevocable (11:29), and non-Jewish Believers have a responsibility to recognize that they too need *the same mercy* that they had been shown (11:30-32). **They can by no means just snub their noses at Jewish people who have rejected Yeshua**, but instead do what they can to make sure that such a special calling upon them is honored¹¹—and even more so if they are to largely appropriate such a calling as a part of God's people, accomplishing the tasks of being a Kingdom of priests and intermediaries between God and the world (Exodus 19:5-6; Isaiah 42:6; cf. 1 Peter 2:9). How a growing and demographically changing Messianic movement learns to do this *will be a huge challenge* for us to consider (as some have sought to redefine Torah observance and the Messianic lifestyle *outside* of any Jewish tradition).

There have been a great many proposals made in recent days as to what Romans 11:25-32 actually means, especially with the rise of the Two-House sub-movement in the past decade. I think that there is more than meets the eye to the mystery that Paul details, but I would not at all be prepared to claim that *every* non-Jewish Believer is a part of scattered Israel as some are. Instead, I would say that Paul recognized that “the fullness of the nations” principally involved their spiritual character, but could very well have involved people of scattered Israel coming back in fulfillment of Tanach prophecies. As this is all a “mystery,” we would do best to refine our understanding of this passage—pay greater attention to detail—and in so doing not come to quick conclusions like “the full number of the Gentiles” (11:25, RSV, NIV, et. al.) equaling some predetermined number of people for salvation. *We need to instead sit down and carefully discuss the interpretational possibilities.* Paul recognizes this as a mystery, because all he can end this section of his letter with is a doxology praising God (11:33-36; Isaiah 40:13; Job 35:7; 41:11). I think that for many people, particularly some of today's Messianic Jews, some elements of Romans 11:25-32 may come as a shock to them when Paul's expectation really does come to pass in the end-times.

The remainder of Paul's Epistle to the Romans (chs. 12-15), unlike the significant theology which has preceded it, largely regards some practical issues that concerned the assembly or *assemblies* of Roman Believers. How were Jewish and non-Jewish Believers to function as one in Messiah Yeshua? What were some of the areas of dispute among these people, some made into too big of an issue than necessary? When sub-congregations around Rome met together, how were they to have unity? What do we need to read a little more closely, placing the actual issues into their First Century context?

Romans 12:1 is a frequently-quoted verse, in almost every Christian or Messianic context I have seen: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.” We are all surely to present ourselves as a living sacrifice to God, living properly, like

¹⁰ The Methodist commentator Adam Clarke once noted, “The words πληρωμα των εθνων may be borrowed from the מלא הגוים *melo haggoyim*, a multitude of nations, which the Septuagint translate by πληθος εθνων. By the πληρωμα, or fullness, a great multitude may be intended, which should be so dilated on every hand as to fill various regions” (*Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*. E-Sword 8.0.5. MS Windows 9x. Franklin, TN: Equipping Ministries Foundation, 2008).

¹¹ For a further discussion, consult the editor's article “The Proper Protocol.”

an animal of high blameless quality was to be offered before Him in the Tabernacle or Temple. Yet there is a major missing component that many of us overlook, especially concurrent with Paul's desire for the Roman Believers to be unified and not split over minor issues. **Paul does not say for them to be living sacrifices**; the Greek *thusian* is singular. Paul urges the Romans to be "a holy and living sacrifice" (NASU), indicating that their individual selves, or even individual assemblies, were to come together in corporate unity and serve their world at large sacrificially. *How many of us miss this because of our Western predisposition toward individualism?*²

If the Roman Believers can learn to come together as one in the Lord, then they will demonstrate a spiritual character that is not "of the pattern of this world," and they will be empowered to fulfill His will for them (12:2). The corporate dynamic of the sacrifice Paul envisions for them is readily seen as he issues instructions as to how they might all respect one another. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought...Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Messiah we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (12:3-5). *The bodies join into a single corporate body*. Each has been given different gifts that can serve to meet specific needs (12:6-7), requiring mutual respect and appreciation for fellow Believers.

How is this to take place? What Paul says should be no surprise: love. "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves...Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality...Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited" (12:9-10, 13, 16). Serving as a corporate living sacrifice also extends to how one interacts with outsiders: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse...Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (12:14, 17-18). God is the One who will avenge for any misdeeds that have been committed against His people (12:19; Leviticus 19:18). The job of Believers is to instead help one's enemy (12:20; Proverbs 15:21), as they are to "overcome evil with good" (12:21).

To a major degree, the Apostle Paul says "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities" (13:1a), recognizing that there is a degree of establishment in the secular government by God, and that to reject this authority is to reject Him (13:1b-2). Believers need not live in fear of the government if they do what is just and upright (13:3-5). Paul is not instructing the Romans to blindly follow the Imperial government in all matters, but was probably necessitated by some issues pertaining to taxes. "[Y]ou pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to government. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor" (13:6-7). Wanting the Believers to be honest taxpayers may be a reflection of Jewish problems in Rome regarding taxation,³ which could have then been compounded by additional controversies caused by the Jewish community in Rome when the gospel hit, causing Claudius to actually expel the Jews from the city (Acts 18:2).⁴ Paul simply did not want the Roman Believers to be burdened with any further such problems.

² The closest I have seen a major Romans commentator consider this is Douglas J. Moo, who indicates in a footnote, "The shift from the plural σώματα ('bodies') to the singular θυσίαν ('sacrifice') could indicate that Paul thinks of this presentation as having a corporate dimension, involving the service of the entire Christian community together" (*New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 750, fn. 24). Yet he does not examine it any further.

I would respectfully submit that this same kind of individualism has negatively impacted much of today's Messianic movement. Consult the editor's McHuey Blog post from 27 December, 2008, "Chanukah and Encountering Worldly Philosophies."

³ Such as, "the money-grubbing instincts of the Claudian period" (Cornelius Tacitus: *The Histories*, trans. Kenneth Wellesley [London: Penguin Books, 1992], 278).

⁴ The Roman historian Suetonius records, "Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, [Claudius] expelled them from the city" (*Life of Claudius* 25:2; Suetonius: *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. Robert Graves [London: Penguin Books, 1957], 202). A number of Romans commentators are agreed that this "Chrestus" is none other than a reference to the good news about "the Christ," Yeshua the Messiah, making its way into

Instead of being labeled as disloyal tax cheats, the Roman Believers were instead to only have “the continuing debt of love to one another” (13:8a). And lest anyone think that the Apostle Paul was against the Roman Believers following the Torah, he appeals directly to the Torah, “for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law” (13:8b-10; Exodus 20:13-15, 17; Deuteronomy 5:17-19, 21; Leviticus 19:18). Furthermore, Paul instructs the Romans, “And do this...” (13:11a), urging them to follow such righteous commandments. By doing this and by spurning darkness, the Roman Believers can show themselves to be men and women of the light (13:12-13). Paul admonishes, “clothe yourselves with the Lord Yeshua the Messiah, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature” (13:14).

Continuing in his final instructions to the Romans, Paul speaks to those who may be classified as weak, and those who may be classified as strong. Romans 14 is another difficult section of the epistle for today’s Messianics to deal with, often because it has been traditionally interpreted that those who keep the Sabbath and kosher dietary laws are “weak” brethren, and those who do not keep them are “strong” brethren. This is another part of Paul’s letter that needs to be read rather closely, so we can properly determine what the actual issues are.

Paul instructed the Romans, “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters” (14:1). Would matters of God’s Torah be considered disputable or “doubtful” (NKJV) issues? Is the ongoing validity of certain commandments really the issue here? Those approaching Romans from an anti-Torah bias would approach ch. 14 from this vantage point. Torah observant Messianics, who believe that thusfar Paul has not spoken against the standard of holiness in God’s Law, would argue instead that “disputable matters” relate more to *halachah* and Torah application. It would be such *halachah* and practices that are not only “disputable,” relegated to the classification of “opinions” (RSV/NASU), but those that caused unnecessary divisions among the Roman Believers with one group improperly judging another.

Paul states what the first set of opinions regards: “One man’s faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables” (14:2). It is not difficult to see how one side, the weak side, is a side that has adopted vegetarianism. The other side, the strong side, eats “everything.” But what is “everything” to include? Most interpreters conclude *all meats*. There is no avoiding the fact that “food” is an issue in the larger context (14:20). But, would this “food” include anything that moves, or would it include food that God has designated as *okel/brōma* on the lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14? I would suggest that we need to understand “food” by God’s definition, and so when Paul says later in this section “All food is clean [*katharos*], but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble” (14:20), it is in a context not totally divorced from God’s Torah. It rather involves opinions regarding acceptable, legitimate clean meats to be eaten—and those who do not wish to eat of such meats for specific reasons important to them.

The NIV rendering of 14:3 continues the motif of “eats everything,” even though *panta* does not appear in this verse as it does in 14:2.¹⁵ Instead, the second issue is prefaced, expanding Paul’s instruction, as he gives a specific reason as to why it is inappropriate to unnecessarily judge on eating: “The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him” (NASU). Here, “eating” is referred to in more general terms.¹⁶ Paul instructs, “Who are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (14:4). This could be viewed that those who harshly condemn such brethren do not have

the Roman synagogues and causing a ruckus so big that Claudius’ government expelled the Jewish population from the city.

¹⁵ All that the Greek has is the participle *esthiōn*.

¹⁶ With this in mind, 4:3-12, perhaps discussing optional fast days, is embedded within the argument discussing why vegetarianism was adopted by some of the Roman Believers in 4:1-2, 13-23.

the Lord as their Master, because these brethren are convicted that what they do is right in His sight and such harsh judgment is not becoming of His servant. The people who only eat vegetables also observe special days, which to them are very important, and they need not be unnecessarily judged.

The second disputable matter is now specifically listed by Paul: “One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord” (14:5-6a). Many readers immediately draw the conclusion that the Sabbath is the day Paul mentions here, even though “Sabbath” is not stated explicitly in the text. Due to the unspecific nature of “day,” Biblical ordinances like the Sabbath or appointed times need not be the issue here. Few consider the possibility that “eats” in 14:3 could be introducing the sacred days specified in 14:5. When this is taken into consideration, we see that there were, in fact, various fixed days for fasting on the Jewish religious calendar, such as those remembering the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the First Temple. I would submit that when “he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God” (14:6b, NASU),¹⁷ is discussing optional fast days, as opposed to eating meat—the second part of Paul’s argument on disputable matters.

Just as it would be inappropriate to judge fellow Believers who only eat vegetables, so would it also be inappropriate to judge fellow Believers who might observe special fast days for reasons that are very important to them. Why? “For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord” (14:8). Those who might be vegetarian and observe certain days—out of their opinion—are doing it unto the Lord. The Roman Believers would likely be sensitive to those in their ranks who would fast on a day like the Ninth of Av, so why would they not similarly be sensitive to those who have a vegetarian diet? Paul emphasizes the fact that all will stand before God (14:9-11; Isaiah 45:23), in an effort to point out the weight of one’s personal responsibility “of himself to God” (14:12).

The Apostle Paul desired there to be unity among the Roman Believers: “Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way” (14:13). *These are valid words when disputable matters or opinions are the issue.* But then Paul says something that can get many of today’s Messianic confused. Most versions like the NIV say, “in the Lord Jesus, I am convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean” (14:14). For most readers, Paul now considers the kosher dietary laws to be a matter of opinion, something which he can disregard and relegate as “weak.” **What most miss is that “unclean” is not the term used in Romans 14:14.** In the Torah’s list of clean and unclean meats (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14), the Hebrew term for “unclean” is *tamei*, rendered in the Greek LXX as *akathartos*. But *akathartos* is not used in Romans 14:14; it is instead *koinos*, speaking “of that which ordinary people eat, in contrast to those of more refined tastes” (BDAG).¹⁸

“Common food” is *not* the same as unclean food, but is Biblically clean food (14:20) that is unacceptable for eating according to those of a particular high standard. In a First Century Roman context, this would have likely included Jewish Believers who had adopted vegetarianism (14:2), who for some reason or another would not eat clean meat that had been properly butchered in the Roman marketplace. Of these people Paul would say, “I know and am persuaded in *the* Lord Jesus that nothing by itself is common; except to the *one* deeming anything to be common, *it* is common” (14:14, LITV). Remember that this regards a disputable opinion (14:1), and Bible readers have to ask themselves if things like the kosher dietary laws are disputable opinions or not. And,

¹⁷ The NIV adds “meat” in 14:6b, even though it does not appear in the source text.

¹⁸ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552.

they have to understand “common food” in the context of First Century Judaism, and how non-Jewish Believers may react to the eating habits of certain highly conservative Jewish Believers.¹⁹

The weak brethren in Rome were Jews who were unable to eat so-called common meat, that is, clean and acceptable meat available from the Roman marketplace. This meat may have been served at certain fellowship gatherings. Paul says that this is not to be an issue of division in the Body of Messiah (14:15-16), because “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Messiah in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification” (14:17-19), noting that while clean meat remains clean (14:20), “It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall” (14:21). If there are strong Believers able to eat “common meat,” they need to keep any opinions to themselves (14:22) if their weaker vegetarian brethren somehow might feel condemned by such opinions (14:23). The issue is not big enough for it to cause gross divisions.

The greater concerns of the Body of Messiah are that “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up” (15:1-2). In spite of the opinions or disputable matters that may be present among the Roman Believers, the stronger Believers were to emulate the Messiah (15:3; Psalm 69:9). This would come as a part of their obedience to the Torah, as Paul asserts, “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and encouragement of the Scriptures [i.e., the Tanach] we might have hope” (15:4). As the Roman Believers would properly do this, greater unity would come to them, and they would be able to join one another in worship before God’s Throne (15:5-6).

This was a worship that was to involve all (15:7), and non-Jewish Believers had a responsibility to understand “that Messiah has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy” (15:8-9a), something anticipated and expected in Israel’s Scriptures as the nations were to worship the One True God (15:9b-12; Psalm 19:49; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10). The bond that was to unite all of the Believers in Rome was to come in their worship of the God who sent His Son Yeshua to die for their sins, and in worship of Him the Roman Believers would be filled “with all joy and peace,” overflowing “with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13). Once in such a venue, would the disputable matters dividing them seem pretty insignificant.

Paul knows what the calling God has given him is, and he recognizes that the Romans are inherently good people who will do the right things. Paul exhorts, “I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. I have written you quite boldly on some points” (15:14-15a), as he does need to assert his position as God’s Apostle to the nations (15:15b-16). In this sacred calling, Paul has been guided by the Holy Spirit to see the nations come to faith in Israel’s Messiah, and witness great miracles via the gospel (15:17-19). He summarizes by telling them, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Messiah was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation (15:20ff; Isaiah 52:15), noting “This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you” (15:22).

The time had now come for Paul to visit Rome, and to move into the Western Roman Empire where the good news had yet to really been declared (15:23-24). Until Paul can make his way to Rome, though, he notes that it is his intention to take up a collection for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem (15:25-26), because “if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them in their material blessings” (15:27).²⁰ Once completed, Paul will be making his way to Rome and then onto Spain (15:28), and so he is sure to say “I know that when I come, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Messiah” (15:29), asking the Romans to pray for his struggles in God’s service (15:30-33).

¹⁹ This is examined in more detail in the editor’s article “To Eat or Not to Eat?”

²⁰ Cf. Isaiah 2:2-4; 60:6-7, 11; Micah 4:13.

It is easy for many readers to stop reading Romans at the end of ch. 15, but ch. 16 need not be overlooked. While it is true that Paul has not personally visited the Romans before, ch. 16 shows us that he did have a wide familiarity with many of the Believers, extending them greetings. Furthermore, the people that he extends greetings to gives us a wide array of data on the makeup of the Roman Believers—those who might have been Jewish, non-Jewish, male, female, aristocratic, merchants, slaves, and how sub-congregational leaders may be greeted. Of considerable discussion in recent years has been how women played a substantial role in the leadership of the Roman assemblies. Phoebe was not only Paul's patroness, but also the one entrusted with his letter to read it to the Romans and explain it should they have questions (16:1-2). The listing of the Apostle Junia (16:7) has also become a hot topic of academic discussion, as a male name "Junias," as appearing in older Bible versions, is noticeably absent from ancient history unlike the female name "Junia."

Preparing to visit the Romans, the Apostle Paul is very excited, but he urges them once again to be united, staying away from those who would seek to divide them (16:17-18). He expresses confidence, telling them "Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise over what is good, and innocent about what is evil" (16:19). Satan will be defeated, because God is One of peace, especially through the Lord Yeshua who brings His grace to light (16:20).

Today's emerging Messianic movement is not unlike any new religious movement since the Protestant Reformation: at one point or another we have to encounter the text of Romans, and deal with its message and Paul's teachings. Unlike many in the past, we are unique in that the Jewish and non-Jewish issues of Romans—which previous generations may have scratched their heads about—much of what Romans tells us is relevant not only for our theology, *but for on the ground issues in our congregations*. We face many of the same Jewish and non-Jewish questions that Romans asks. Further examination of the issues Romans addresses, consideration of its ancient First Century setting, and new proposals made in Pauline scholarship will surely fuel a great deal of the progress the Lord intends to make through us in the years and decades to come. So just like Paul, even though I may have to speak boldly on various issues or problems from time to time (15:15a), I would still express every confidence that today's Messianic Believers will ultimately make the right choice. We will be a united people in worship before God (15:8-13), and via the power of His Spirit accomplish the imperatives of the gospel for all!

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