

### THE BOOK OF ROMANS

#### Lesson 2, Intro continued and Chapter 1

We'll continue today with our introduction (I prefer to think of it as our preparation) for the Book of Romans.

Last time we talked a great deal about Paul and that in order to understand what he means by what he says we necessarily have to understand his Jewish rabbinical mindset. This understanding of Paul as fully Jewish in every way before, during, and after his acceptance of Yeshua as the long awaited Jewish Messiah, is the key to unlocking Paul's difficult words and theology in all of his Epistles; and none more so than in Romans. The bad news is that since early in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., Paul has been characterized as having become more gentile than Jew and that the underlying premise of his theology is that Jewishness ought to be abandoned for those who wanted to join Christianity. The good news is that a different worldview of Paul has recently emerged from some highly respected, top-of-the-food-chain, Bible academics. This new worldview goes by the informal title "the new perspective". The new perspective goes against the basic understanding of Paul as a conflicted Jew, or as Jew who "converted" and became a gentile Christian even if he maintained an outward appearance as a Jew so that he could continue to live and walk among the Jewish community. Rather the new perspective acknowledges his full-fledged Jewishness; a Jewishness he never abandoned nor compromised.

My stance is that the new perspective on Paul is a welcomed breath of fresh air, is on the right track, and has the potential to revolutionize the Christian faith. Because this new perspective offers what is a radical departure from 19 centuries of Christian thought and characterization of Paul, those who champion it (beginning with E.P. Sanders) are only willing to make some guarded philosophical statements about it and to delve lightly into a few technical Hebrew terms and a bit of Jewish history to follow up on its impact. They do not seem willing to challenge traditional gentile Christian thinking with what is obviously Jewish cultural terms and expressions that Paul uses often, which do not match with what is typically taught by the Church as his meaning. I have little doubt that the reason for their reluctance to follow this road to where it will logically lead is because Sanders and others see it as possibly too disruptive to the accepted doctrines and theology of the institutional Church and therefore a danger to their personal careers.

But we shall pursue this line of thinking to its fullest, because while it is new and troubling to our many Church denominations, it is fundamental to the Hebrew Roots of Christianity and thus to the teaching and beliefs of Seed of Abraham Torah Class.

I'm not going to take the time to review what we discussed in the first part of our introduction to Romans. If you missed it, I urge you to go back to the first lesson on Romans on your own or you will not have some much needed context for what is coming. So let's get some basics out of the way before we open up our Bibles to Romans chapter 1.

There is little opposition among Bible scholars to the fact that it was Paul who wrote the Book of Romans. He claims that he did, and what he discusses and how he discusses matters is typical Paul. In fact in chapter 16 he says that he is writing this letter to the Romans from Gaius's house, a place where the local Believers' congregation meets. If this is the same Gaius that he baptized and that we read about in 1 Corinthians 1 (and it is likely that it is), then it means that Paul is writing his letter to the Romans from Corinth. His itinerary and timeline as it appears in Acts allows for this interpretation.

Paul had the stated intention of traveling to Spain. Rome, then, would be a logical place to stop and stay for awhile on his way to Spain. Very likely this letter was written towards the end of his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey, when he was planning on getting back to Jerusalem in time for the Shavuot Festival. So with good confidence we can say that the Book of Romans was written in 57 or 58 A.D., probably leaning towards the earlier date. What is important to know is that he wrote the letter to the Romans a few years before he was taken, as a prisoner, to Rome where he apparently met his death. So don't mistakenly think that the Book of Romans is the result of his time in Rome that we read about in the final chapter of Acts. The order of our New Testament sort of creates that false impression because the Book of Romans immediately follows Acts in the New Testament; Acts is where we hear about his journey to Rome. What this means is that Yeshua had come and gone about 25 years earlier, and so the Jesus Movement had had around a quarter century to spread; turns out it was wildly successful.

So what did Paul hope to accomplish by writing this extensive letter to the Believing community in Rome? A letter that, for its day, was abnormally long. That is the subject of widely varying opinions. If one is from the rather standard Evangelical worldview, then Paul's purpose was to use this letter to create a new Christian systematic theology. Fortunately, mainstream Bible scholars who see validity in the new perspective on Paul are having the courage to at least start to pour cold water on this long held Christian doctrine that Romans is systematic theology. In his highly acclaimed commentary on Romans, Douglas J. Moo, a teacher at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, says this: ***"It is not a systematic theology but a letter, written in specific circumstances and with specific purposes. The message of Romans is, indeed, timeless; but to understand its message aright, we must appreciate the specific context out of which Romans was written"***.

That context is what we are going to develop over the next several months as we study the book; it is too complex to reduce to a couple of stock bumper-sticker phrases. However the message of Romans therefore explains the purpose of Romans. And when it comes to the message the viewpoints are also wide ranging; but first and foremost in modern Christianity it is, as I have just said, Paul establishing a Christian systematic theology primarily for the benefit of gentiles. As much as I disagree with that, I must also admit that I have no rigid view on a single definable purpose or message for the book; I think Paul had several issues he was addressing that were directly aimed at the Roman Believers. However by now Paul had gained much experience in dealing with gentiles and in bringing gentile Believers into the fold. But because his preferred base of operations (wherever he went to evangelize) was a synagogue this meant he also dealt with Jews and in bringing Jewish Believers into the fold. As Paul had learned the hard way, this dynamic of including gentiles in a Jewish messianic faith opened up a religious can of worms regarding the touchy relationship between Jewish and gentile

Believers; a touchy relationship that has barely changed over the 2 millennia since the days of Paul. So, as my friend Joseph Shulam aptly puts it: ***“The book of Romans presents us with a textual picture of certain prevalent and controversial theological debates within Second Temple Jewish thought”***. If we approach the Book of Romans understanding this underlying circumstance then we'll be far more able to decipher what Paul intends and what he is dealing with.

Because I know that many of you may not have studied the Book of Acts with me as a sort of prerequisite for studying Romans, then a term such as “Second Temple Jewish thought” might sound a bit high-brow and confusing. The term is simply referring to the Biblical time period when, after the Babylonian exile of the Jews, the Temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt. The first Temple was built by Solomon in the late 900's B.C. and stood until the Babylonians destroyed it around 587 B.C. The second Temple then is what Ezra and Nehemiah built as former Jewish captives set free by the Persians some 70 years after the Babylonians had conquered them. So the Second Temple Period actually begins as early as about 500 B.C. and continues on until the Romans destroyed it in 70 A.D.

That said, what concerns us is that small portion of the long Second Temple Period that begins a little before the birth of Christ and continues throughout the New Testament time. As you can imagine is the case with most any culture, many changes occurred within Jewish society and religion over the nearly 600 year time period from Israel's release from captivity in Babylon to when the second Temple was destroyed. What matters in our study is how Judaism was taught, known and practiced by Jewish society from about the year 10 B.C. to about 70 A.D., because Judaism was the basis of Jewish society. That was especially so in the Holy Land, but it also extended to all the places in foreign lands where 95% of all living Jews resided. Judaism was less stringent and not quite as dominant in the Diaspora; but nonetheless Judaism still formed the foundation for Jewish culture in the Diaspora. That is because unlike modern Christianity, which is routinely compartmentalized and separated away from the non-religious part of our lives, Judaism defined every detail of every aspect of Jewish life, 24 hours a day, every day of the year, from birth to death. If you were a Jew in New Testament times there was no compartmentalizing and no days off from Judaism.

Paul was a Jew; others verified that he was a Jew (such as Luke and Peter), and he was a Rabbi, having graduated from Gamaliel's Rabbinical school. In fact he belonged to one of the strictest sects of Judaism, the Pharisees. This is something that he readily admitted to, and stated for the record in Acts 26 that he remained a Pharisee; this statement was made some years **after** writing the letter to the Romans. In fact in Acts 24, as he stood before Governor Felix, he plainly said that he also remained committed to the Law (something that was mandatory if one was to maintain their Jewishness).

So from the 30,000 foot view I see the Book of Romans as Paul wrestling within himself, and by and between the gentile Believers versus the Jewish Believers in Yeshua, over the place of gentiles within the community of Believers as well their place in the Kingdom of Heaven. He is caught between 2 worlds that on the surface have little, if any, common ground. He was thoroughly a rabbinical Jew who had lived his entire life based upon Jewish Law, ***Halakhah***; but at the same time the risen Yeshua had instructed Paul to be His emissary to take the

Gospel to the gentile world in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant. Since Paul was the designated Apostle to the gentiles, then it seems that Christ left it up to him to figure out how to establish principles and rules that would adapt a Hebrew Gospel to a gentile culture, or perhaps vice versa. No doubt this forced Paul to carefully examine something that had become hazy within Judaism over the last few centuries, and was intertwined within his life: what part of Judaism was actually Holy Scripture and what part was Tradition? Where are the boundaries? Which rules are the non-negotiables? What should be seen as the core issues and what can be seen as side issues? What is mandatory and what is optional? Can there be different rules (even different theologies) for Jews versus gentiles if the two groups that have been historic enemies have any hope of living and worshipping side by side as brothers and sisters in Christ?

Oh yes; we know from the Bible and other sources that while Paul could legitimately claim his office as Apostle to the gentiles (Yeshua, Himself, had appointed Paul to the office as recorded in Acts chapter 9), there were other Jewish Believers who took it upon themselves to proselytize gentiles for Christ (in Acts 18 we read of one particular independent Jewish evangelist named Apollos). In fact, the awkward position that Paul immediately finds himself in as he is penning the opening to his letter to the Romans is that he must admit that he is NOT the founder of the Believing community in Rome; he's never even been to Rome. Someone else (probably a few others) had some time ago established the Believing community there. So is Paul "sheep stealing" by now jumping in and insisting that the Believers of Rome follow his teaching and rulings? Paul's implication in the Book of Romans is unmistakable: he holds himself up as the final authority over the congregation in Rome regardless of what those who first brought the Gospel to Rome may have taught. But so far as the Believers of Rome are concerned, by whose decree is Paul the final authority? At the moment James, brother of Jesus, was still the recognized leader of The Way in Jerusalem, the acknowledged headquarters of the movement. Paul's answer to this question is the truth: Messiah Yeshua appointed him. But will anyone believe him? Even more, does being the Apostle to the gentiles elevate Paul's status such that all gentile Believers are to consider Paul as their leader, instead of James? Might this split the Jesus movement into gentiles and Jews with gentiles following Paul and Jews following James? This was the ambiguous and tense situation that Paul was facing, and it is why he goes into such depth in his letter and covers an array of issues. Some of his letter is to introduce himself; some is to explain his office as an Apostle and why they should submit to him; and some is to instruct Rome's Believers in what Paul sees as important theological issues that define their faith, their relationship to God, and the inherently problematic relationship between the Jews and gentiles who form the Believing community.

But who better to do this seemingly impossible task than Paul? He could speak, read, and write Greek and Hebrew. He was a Diaspora Jew so he had much more tolerance and familiarity with gentiles than his Holy Land Jewish countrymen. He was a stellar rabbinical student of Gamaliel and thus held great knowledge of the Torah, the Prophets, and Jewish Law (**Halakhah**). He had served the Jewish High Court, the Sanhedrin. And his Choleric personality allowed him to lead instinctively and to not shy away from confrontation. When we understand the totality of who Paul was as a person that is the beginning of understanding why he says what he says, and how he goes about saying it. As I emphasized in the first lesson for

Romans, Paul naturally debated and answered questions in a way that is quite typical of rabbis and is familiar in the Jewish Talmud. But if a gentile Christian commentator has no understanding of this protocol (and none I am aware of do) then what Paul says can be, and regularly is, misconstrued.

With this background on Paul and the backdrop of his era and his circumstances, let's open the New Testament to Romans chapter 1 and get started.

### READ ROMANS CHAPTER 1 all

The opening words are: From Paul. I know our CJB say **Sha'ul**, but that is not correct. In Greek his name is Paulos or Paulus. All throughout the Book of Romans he calls himself Paulos (we change that to Paul in English); but never is his Hebrew name **Sha'ul** (or Saul) used.

But it's the next few words where it gets interesting; we're going to go slow for awhile because we need to define some terms to not only understand what is happening here but also to set the proper tone for this entire letter. I hope this will also enable me to make a rather significant point about interpreting the Book of Romans and why in our introduction I characterized what we would be doing as cross-examining this work of Paul.

Paul begins by calling himself a slave of the Messiah Yeshua. Some English versions have changed the term slave to bond-servant. Bond-servant is a mistranslation; it is often the preferred term, however, because of the modern-day, Western gentile world's abhorrence to the institution of slavery. But it must be stated that the word chosen in Greek, **doulos**, slave, was also a hot button word and highly derogatory in ancient Roman society. Being a slave in the Hellenistic world of the Roman Empire was a most shameful thing and for Paul to call himself a slave immediately lowered his status in the eyes of gentiles, even though he says that he was a slave to his god. Obviously Paul's intent is not to lower his status as his immediate goal is to establish his authority, so this means we must cross-examine this term in the Hebrew cultural context to get the correct sense of it.

So right out of the gate we see the Jewish Paul explaining and communicating in Jewish thought pattern, but he is confined to having to use the Greek language to do it since his letter recipients were Greek speakers. Paul is thinking in Hebrew societal and theological terms, but having to use the best available Greek words to translate. And as any translator will tell you, this can be a difficult task as there aren't always precise parallel words between languages and cultures, so often the meaning gets a bit skewed. In Hebrew society a "slave" was a title or status that was actually honorable and admirable **when** that person was described as being a slave of YHWH God. The Hebrew word for slave is **eved**; it meant both servant and slave because they were seen as essentially the same thing. Moses was called a slave of YHWH in Joshua 14:7, the Prophet Elijah was called a slave of YHWH in 2 Kings 10:10, and David was regularly called a slave of God. This was, in Hebrew thought, high praise. There many more examples of this in Scripture.

Westerners spontaneously recoil from the term slave (less so from servant) because of our



historical moral tug of war with the institution of slavery, which more often than not amounted to the enslavement and mistreatment of another and different race of people from us that, for our convenience and conscience, we declared were inferior. Servants, however, were seen as an honorable and valuable institution of the lower classes serving the upper classes in typical European aristocracy. So the older the English Bible, the more we'll see the word servant inserted where the word ought to be slave. The point is that while it appears to the gentile Christian mind that Paul is deeply humbling himself by using the denigrating designation "slave" (denigrating to a Westerner), in reality in the Biblical Hebrew society of his day being a slave of God was a position of special honor that he was ascribing to himself. It would be somewhat like saying I'm a Priest of God. That is why Paul immediately follows up the "slave of Yeshua" label (an especially honorable title) by adding the equally honorable, but different, title that he is also an emissary (an apostle) because God has set him apart for a special purpose. Let me be clear: to the average gentile Bible reader the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of Romans 1 looks to be Paul humbling himself; he's not. He's actually claiming that he holds a high position of great authority due to his special association with God.

Let me also point out that surely Paul expected this letter to be received by a Jewish Believer in Rome who would read and explain it to the gentile Believers. Otherwise if a gentile had received it and read it by himself, Paul would have been seen as a major turn off to the Roman gentile Believers because he characterized himself as a slave. Yet as we move forward in our study we will see that he obviously sought to impress the Believers' community of Rome with his letter, such that they would accept his authority and spiritual leadership.

Let's talk for a bit about what the term Apostle means. Apostle is an English word; in Greek the word is apostolos and interestingly in the Roman world of Paul's day it applied to sending out merchant ships and military expeditions. So once again it is critical that we understand this Greek term in its Hebrew sense as opposed to its Roman sense. Apostolos is an attempt to translate the concept behind the Hebrew term **shaliach** into Greek, although **shaliach** and apostolos aren't precise synonyms (a typical translation problem). **Shaliach** carries the concept of agency in it; that is, a 3<sup>rd</sup> party is empowered to perform business on behalf of the person sending him. So the agent is given the power of his employer who sends him in his stead; the agent is thus to be viewed by those he is dealing with as the equal of his employer in whatever narrow or wide area of authority he has been given.

So an Apostle in the Hebrew/Jewish world carried as much authority as the one who sent him; he wasn't merely a glorified messenger. This is why Christ would say to some of his original 12 apostles (12 **shaliach** actually):

**John 14:12-13 CJB** <sup>12</sup> *Yes, indeed! I tell you that whoever trusts in me will also do the works I do! Indeed, he will do greater ones, because I am going to the Father.*

<sup>13</sup> *In fact, whatever you ask for in my name, I will do; so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.*

Before Yeshua leaves and departs this earth He is empowering his original 12 as His agents (His **shaliach**). And as agents they carry their master's power and authority as Yeshua makes

clear to them. Paul is Yeshua's agent to the gentiles and so carries Yeshua's full power and authority on earth. Paul clearly understands this and the Jewish readers of his letter would as well because they would understand his lofty position within a Jewish cultural context. But Paul's gentile readers in the Roman cultural context would not think of his position as particularly lofty; they would see him more as a regular apostolos (a glorified messenger who is sent by his master) who merely carries out his master's orders but has not been given the degree of autonomous authority that an agent receives.

Paul is an agent of Yeshua, not merely a messenger of Yeshua. I hope you are already starting to get what I'm aiming to show you. In the Book of Romans the culturally Jewish Paul is going to converse in rabbinical Hebrew thought patterns throughout. Yes, his thoughts will largely have to do with gentiles. And yes, if a Roman gentile unversed in Jewish culture read this letter on his own and tried to carry it out as he understood it from a Roman cultural viewpoint it would be different from how Paul intended it. This is what has happened with the Christian Church in general when it comes to reading and understanding Paul's letters over the centuries; and it is why the Bible commentator James D.G. Dunn felt compelled to say that if Christians insist on continuing to perceive Paul, and interpret Paul, in any other than in his true, real, rabbinical Jewish self, it ***"condemns the interpretation of Paul to confusion and contradiction"***.

So already we've turned the first verse of Romans upside down from its traditional Christian understanding by recognizing Paul's Jewishness. Paul is not humbling himself; he is making a case for his readers to accept his God-given authority. This is because Paul sees himself as the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle. The terms apostle and disciple are not synonymous. A disciple is a follower; any follower. An Apostle, as we've seen, is an agent for the master. The first 12 Disciples of Christ were also considered Apostles. Why **12** original Apostles? One for each of the 12 tribes of Israel. So why did Yeshua add a 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle some years later, in the person of Paul? Because in actuality there weren't 12 tribes of Israel, there were 13. When we look at the list of 12 tribes, Levi is not included. Levi is not counted among the other tribes because of their special position as Yehoveh's priests. But, at the same time, indeed they are a tribe produced by Jacob and they are a tribe of Israel.

It is interesting to me that the 13<sup>th</sup> tribe of Israel is counted as priests, and Paul as the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle makes the connection that Believers are to be counted as priests; not physical priests that add to or replace the Levite priests, but rather priests in the spiritual sense. As Rabbi Baruch likes to point out, numbers in the Bible matter.

Next, our thoroughly Jewish Paul says that the origination of the Gospel, the Good News of Messiah Yeshua that he is bringing to gentiles, is taken from the holy writings; the Hebrew Scriptures and specifically the Prophets. Let me remind you that as of this time we are 150 years away from having a Christian New Testament ordained into existence. So whatever talk we hear from Paul about scriptures and holy writings refers to the only holy writings that existed in Paul's day: what we call the Old Testament. Some of the Gospel accounts about Christ and some of Paul's letters would indeed start circulating among Believing congregations even by the time of the Book of Romans. But to call them holy writ or the New Testament is reading something back into the Bible that wouldn't exist until well over a century

later. To be clear: Paul says that the Gospel is an Old Testament concept. But the point that he is making to gentiles is that it was a HEBREW religious concept taken from the HEBREW holy book.

In verse 3 Paul explains that this Good News (evangelion in Greek) is directly about, and tied to, God's Son. Now the term God's son or son of God was used in Hebrew culture in a number of settings. Sometimes it referred to Israel as a whole, other times to the kings of Israel, even at times to angels. Thus it would take some additional definition by Paul to better explain who this Son of God is that he speaking about and what, exactly, that means. So the next attribute of who the Good News is about is that he is descended from King David physically. So this person is spiritually tied to God, and physically tied to King David. These two attributes are essential to the expected Messiah of Israel. But what positively identified this person who is the subject of the Good News as Yeshua of Nazareth is that He was resurrected from the dead. Then Paul adds yet another attribute to this person at the center of the Good News; the Gospel: this person is also Lord. It is one thing to be the Messiah who liberates Israel from their oppressors; it is another to be Israel's Lord because it adds the attribute of divinity to the Messiah. Who would understand such a thing? Gentiles (even if they are Believers)? Heavens no; only Jews would understand even the thrust of Paul's assertion whether they agreed with it or not, because a Messiah and his nature are uniquely Hebrew concepts.

Verse 5 has Paul explaining that Yeshua is the mediator of this Good News. Thus it is from Yeshua that grace and authority have been given to Paul of being the Apostle (or better, *shaliach*, agent) to the gentiles. Then in verse 6 Paul extends that authority to include the gentiles of Rome. Let's be clear about what is happening here. I said in the first part of my message today that Paul finds himself in an awkward position vis a vis the congregation of Rome. He did not establish any of the Believing congregations in Rome. He did not hand pick and install the elders nor did he establish the doctrines they should observe. In fact he has never even been to Italy, let alone Rome. But his goal is to convince the Believers of Rome to accept him as their ultimate earthly religious authority; especially the gentiles but clearly the Jewish Believers, too. Now watch Paul's impeccable logic at work. Point 1: it was Yeshua that appointed Paul as the 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle. Point 2: this 13<sup>th</sup> Apostle was to act as Yeshua's agent to the gentiles. Point 3: it was this same Yeshua who called (elected) the gentile Believers of Rome to the faith. Point 4: therefore since points 1, 2 and 3 are true, then it follows that the gentiles of Rome must be subject to Paul's Apostleship.

Paul is playing hardball. Yet, what he says is true. He is right. But around 4 years later when Paul finally does get to Rome, it is as a prisoner. And when he finally meets the leadership of the Rome Jewish community, we read this exchange in Acts chapter 28:

### **Acts 28:20-22 CJB**

***<sup>20</sup> This is why I (Paul) have asked to see you and speak with you, for it is because of the hope of Isra'el that I have this chain around me."***

***<sup>21</sup> They said to him, "We have not received any letters about you from Y'hudah, and***



***none of the brothers who have come from there has reported or said anything bad about you.***

***<sup>22</sup> But we do think it would be appropriate to hear your views from you, yourself; for all we know about this sect is that people everywhere speak against it."***

While it is my speculation, it would seem that Paul's effort to be accepted as the long-distance authority over the Believers in Rome didn't take hold. Although the implication from the Book of Acts is that these Jews Paul met with were probably not Believers, it is not possible that they had no dealings at all with the Believing community of Jews and gentiles in the same city.

What we also see in this excerpt from Acts 28 is that the Jews of Rome of course looked to Judea (specifically meaning Jerusalem) as their religious authority, as they tell Paul they've heard nothing bad about him from Judea. So since he is here they want to hear directly from Paul. There is no hint that these Jews knew anything about any letter Paul had sent to the Romans about 4 years earlier.

But interestingly what we find as the Book of Acts comes to a close is that some of these Jews who came to meet with Paul believed Him and so accepted Yeshua as their Messiah. And, so, Paul has accomplished something of great importance to him and to the Lord; he has established a community of Believers in Rome with him as its unquestionable head. What of the community of Believers that Paul addressed his letter to the Romans to some 4 years earlier? We don't know; there is no mention of them in Acts 28 and no specific mention of them in other New Testament books. But clearly Paul teaching and leading this new Believer's community that he personally established even as a prisoner must have survived and thrived as did all the other ones that he had personally established in Corinth, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and so on. This is because within just a couple of more years, the unstable Nero will begin a vicious campaign of persecution against Believers in Rome in order to try to draw attention away from himself as the one who started a fire that burned a huge portion of Rome to the ground, and instead blame it on the Believers.

Now that we've concluded the preamble to the letter to the Romans, next time we'll move to verse 7 and the body of the letter.