

## **The Mystery of Romans – a Torah and Shema Centric View:**

The Apostle Paul was a Torah observant Jew. This fact has been lost in the darkness of Christianity's 1900+ year fall into apostasy. The theological move, the 'New Perspective' on the Apostle Paul (see E.P. Sanders, James D.G. Dunn, and N.T. Wright, et al) began the journey back to this truth, which has been further solidified in recent years by scholars like Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, Stanley Stowers, Neil Elliott, Mark Nanos, and Pamela Eisenbaum.

Prior to Paul's intended journey to Rome, he wrote to the followers of Yeshua in Rome, mainly as a reminder to some of them to stem a worrying trend, that he had been informed, was developing there.

It is very important to understand who his implied audience was and what the situation was actually like in Rome at the time of his writing. It is also important to factor in the historical and extra-biblical evidence that we have from this time and even up to the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, that illuminates the reality that existed in Rome.

Understanding the true situation and the true intent and meaning behind Paul's epistle also adds strong circumstantial evidence for the reality of Yeshua and his resurrection as well as the reality of the Apostle Paul's Damascus Road transformation.

The reality though is far from the common theological picture that has been painted for many hundreds of years.

The reality, if acknowledged, endorsed and taken to heart by mainstream Christianity could bring about a mass and most welcome change in both attitude, and approach. It could, and should shake Christianity to the core.

It could and should bring a realization that Gentile Christianity needs to get down on it's knees and seek forgiveness, both for it's failure to demonstrate true faith in action and it's failure to appreciate the proper place of the Jewish people and the nation of Israel.

Why and how can it be that the theological understanding of Paul's letter to Rome has been so misunderstood and misapplied for so long? The answer to these questions, along with most of the questions that are raised by the specter of an impotent and crippled Christianity is much the same.

It has taken as increasing awareness of the reality that the Apostle Paul was in fact, an observant Jew, as alluded to above, coupled with some Jewish theologians, rather than Christian theologians, revisiting the premises and presuppositions through which Romans is viewed and assessed.

Chief amongst these Jewish theologians has been Mark Nanos. His book 'The Mystery of Romans' is a brilliant exposition on the whole message and situation.

Nanos demonstrates very clearly that '*Paul's purpose for writing to Rome was his concern that the situation there was deteriorating at the suggestion of those who were challenging 'the teaching'*' (Romans 6:17) that had brought them into a knowledge of the One True God and His Messiah<sup>1</sup>.

Nanos goes on to demonstrate that the followers of Yeshua were part of the community that was built around some tens, hundreds or even thousands of synagogues (including those meeting in homes) that existed in Rome at the time. The Gentile believers had joined these Jewish communities in the Diaspora and it was through these communities that they had come into the knowledge of the

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<sup>1</sup> I have not reproduced here the impressive evidence that Nanos presents. I have just tried to summarise something of his understanding. I do strongly recommend a reading of his book on Romans.

Messiah Yeshua and his Father, the One True God.

Nanos provides evidence that these diaspora Jewish communities in Rome were composed of:

- 1) non-Christ-believing Jews,
- 2) Christ-believing Jews and,
- 3) Christ-believing Gentiles.

What this may not on first reading and reflection seem that unusual, what needs to be made clear here is that the Apostle Paul see's all three of these sub-groups as 'saved', that is, as sharing a faith in the Almighty and His purposes that both leads to living and acting righteously in this age, as well as providing them with a place in the Age to Come, in the full implementation of the Kingdom of God.

Nanos actually make a brilliant suggestion that accords with this appreciation and that almost instantly allows the many apparent contradictions in Paul's writings to dissolve away. He suggests that *"To be more faithful to the contextual usage of Paul's language, the interpreter of Paul's rhetoric should add, **for non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ**" to the end of virtually every characterization of Paul's position.*"<sup>2</sup> I recommend this approach be taken to every one of Paul's epistles.

While this may not seem that earth-shattering on first appraisal, when considered along with the high probability (as demonstrated by Nanos), that the 'strong' whom Paul forcefully admonishes and warns are a sub-group of the Gentile believers, and that the 'weak'<sup>3</sup> Paul speaks of are non-Christ believing Jews, the implications are huge.

To unpack this a little, first consider this comment by Pamela Eisenbaum on Nanos' work:

*"Both Jews and gentiles have their unique role to play in God's plan for world history—what biblical scholars commonly call salvation history. Paul's understanding of "salvation history" appears in Romans 9—11, chapters so variously interpreted that Nanos' attempt to gain clarity is most welcome. He identifies a two step plan, the first step achieves salvation for gentiles, the second redeems Israel, i.e., the Jewish community.*

*Step One:*

*Because many Jews did not accept the gospel Paul preached, Paul proclaimed Christ to the gentiles. Nanos correctly points out that Paul believed the advent of Christ had signaled the end of the age. And, according to the prophets, the end of the age meant the ingathering of the nations, i.e., when the peoples of the world would finally recognize and worship the one, true God. It was Israel's job "to be a light to the nations" (Isaiah 49:5-6), so Paul took it upon himself to preach the good news to the gentiles. Paul's mission then, in proclaiming to the nations the message of Christ having died and been raised, was to inaugurate this eschatological moment. The fact that many of Paul's Jewish peers did not believe in Jesus and did not believe in the validity of Paul's mission was not a problem for the Apostle; on the contrary, Jewish resistance was part of the plan. Since part of Israel rejected Paul's message, there was greater opportunity to reach out to the other peoples of the world.*

*Step Two:*

*The ingathering of the nations provokes Israel's jealousy, and, as a result, leads to repentance and restoration. Thus, in Paul's words, "all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26). In the typical reading of Romans, Israel's jealousy derives from the other nations currying favor with God. For Nanos, Israel is jealous of Paul's missionary success. Once Paul persuades the known world to embrace monotheism in the form of the worship of Israel's God, then the other Jews will recognize this as the ingathering of the nations, embrace Paul's mission and message, and together Jew and Gentile will*

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<sup>2</sup> See "Rethinking the "Paul and Judaism" Paradigm" by Mark Nanos at [www.marknanos.com](http://www.marknanos.com)

<sup>3</sup> Nanos demonstrates that Paul's terminology for 'weak' (whether originally in Hebrew or Greek) would be better translated into English as 'stumbling'. I discuss this later on in this short article.

*be saved. Of course, salvation here does not mean personal salvation, but the inauguration of a new era of peace, tranquillity, and justice. By interpreting Romans 9—11 this way, Nanos bolsters his contention that **Paul's dispute with other Jews is not focused on the validity of Judaism or the practice of Jewish law.** It is rather a dispute about God's timetable. Paul believes the end of the age is imminent; it is time for the ingathering of the nations. His opponents just think they are at a different point in history."*<sup>4</sup> - Pamela Eisenbaum (Associate Professor of Biblical Studies and Christian Origins at the Iliff School of Theology, Denver, Colorado)

As may be seen in this very brief outline of part of Prof. Nanos' argument, all three groups in the Diaspora Jewish communities in Rome are, as far as Paul is concerned, part of the family of God, and that Paul is not in any way, shape, or form introducing a new faith, but arguing for a new understanding of how Gentiles can come into the family of God and become children of Abraham.

Paul's great discussion of the 'weak' and the 'strong' is shown by Nanos to mean something very very different from what it is normally taken to mean. Nanos demonstrates that the word translated 'weak' is really a word chosen by Paul to mean 'stumbling'. Paul sees the Diaspora Jews in Rome who have not accepted that Yeshua is the Messiah as 'stumbling' over this truth. If they accept this truth, Paul believes it will greatly strengthen them (in part, in that they will be filled with joyous expectation that the Coming Age, the great time when the 'lion' will lay down with the 'lamb' is about to dawn).

So in contrast to these 'stumbling' non-Christ believing Jews, the 'strong' Gentile believers, who have been given the great grace and joy to learn about the Almighty and His Son, are in danger through a poor and perhaps even arrogant attitude, of not helping the 'stumbling', but rather by their actions actually further 'pushing' them so that they don't just 'stumble' but may fall and be 'destroyed'.

The 'strong' are pictured as walking alongside and on the same path (to God), with their 'stumbling' brothers. It may not take much of a 'push' to allow the 'stumbling' to fall rather than the 'strong' showing humility and gratitude and offering a helping hand, so that those 'stumbling' may be helped to properly 'stand' and also then be strengthened in recognizing that the Messianic Age has dawned.

Such a picture of 'stumbling' and the implied options available to those who are walking beside the stumbling ones is painted in Lev 19:14 *"You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall fear your God: I am the LORD."*

Nanos goes on to emphatically demonstrate that Paul is speaking to these 'strong' Gentile believers about their non-Christ believing Jewish brothers when he tells him:

*"Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. ... For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died."* - Romans 14:13,15

Remember, Yeshua the Christ died for his people, for Israel. He even stated that he came for the lost sheep of the House of Israel. Thus 'the one whom Christ died' is the Israelite, and in this context, the 'stumbling' non-Christ believing Jew.

So, when the Gentiles ignore the Sabbath or eat pork or meat sacrificed to idols in the presence of the Jewish community in which they are now members, they are placing a 'stumbling block' in the path of their non-Christ believing Jewish neighbours and brothers.

How? Because their scant regard for, and disrespect of, the Torah, even just the dietary laws,

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<sup>4</sup> "The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter" Reviewed by Pamela Eisenbaum – at [www.marknanos.com](http://www.marknanos.com)

suggests to these Torah observant Jews, that these Gentiles can not possibly know the One True God and that therefore, the claim that Yeshua is the Messiah must be a false claim. Paul desired and prayed that all his Jewish brethren would, like him, recognize the Yeshua was the Messiah and that the ‘end times’ and hence the full restoration of Israel was at hand. He desired that they all share his joyous expectation. The arrogant and disrespectful attitude of some of the Gentile believers was most unhelpful towards this end.

Skip Moen sums it up quite well on his blog:

*“... Paul instructs Gentile Messianic believers (the strong) to live in such a way that they cause no offense to their as-yet-unconvinced Jewish brothers and sisters. In other words, while it is possible that Gentile believers in the Messiah could claim they do not have to live according to Torah (since they are not Jews), Paul tells them to do so anyway because when they do, they will demonstrate the humility necessary to convince their Jewish colleagues that they really have embraced Yeshua as the Messiah and they really are part of the people of God.*

*This is Luther (and most Christian believers) turned upside-down. Paul is telling us to live according to Jewish practices in order that Jews might be convinced of our sincerity in the faith and recognize Yeshua is their Messiah too.*

*Everything we know about Paul and his view of Torah confirms that Nanos is correct. We have it backwards. We are trying to convince Jews to become Christians by living in ways that deny everything they know about God and His Torah. We think Jews need to be “converted” to Christianity. We have bought Luther’s line. But Paul is arguing just the opposite. Why wouldn’t he? He is a Torah-observant Jew who desperately wants his Jewish brothers to see who Yeshua is – the Jewish Messiah.” - <http://skipmoen.com/tag/mark-nanos/>*

It is also critical then to recognize that the issue in the whole discussion of ‘weak’ vs ‘strong’ or better ‘stumbling’ vs ‘strong’, is that it is **not** at all about ‘Christian’ freedom from the Law (or Torah). To quote Nanos again: “... Rather, the implicit critique is of **faith** that fails to recognize that Jesus is the Christ, the Lord of Israel, and also the Savior of the world. For Paul, their faith is not deficient because it includes the practice of the Law and Jewish customs; it is deficient in that it is just not yet **able** to recognize that the promises have been fulfilled in Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

Nanos states that it was his realization, that the Shema played a central role in the Apostle Paul’s theology, that led him to re-evaluate Paul and recognize the reality of who Paul was, and what Paul was arguing for in Romans. Scholars had recognized that the Shema was central to Yeshua’s world view, but few had recognized that Paul shared the same core values and understanding.

In fact, Nanos demonstrates that the Shema was pivotal to Paul’s appreciation that non-Jewish believers in Yeshua as the Messiah must remain non-Jews and not become proselytes. Similarly, Jews must remain Jewish, and hence Torah observant as Paul was, even after accepting the faith position that Yeshua is the Messiah.

If God is indeed One, then he is the God of the Jews and the Gentiles ... “*Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.*” – Romans 3:29-30

So Nanos goes on to demonstrate that Paul both argues for the advantages of being Jewish, as well as arguing that there is no disadvantage to not being Jewish, if the Gentile has the **faith of/in Yeshua**<sup>6</sup>.

This is because Paul is speaking to a Jewish community of sub-groups that exhibit and practice

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<sup>5</sup> The Mystery of Romans’ p 119

<sup>6</sup> See my article ‘The Faith of Jesus’ at [www.circumcisedheart.info](http://www.circumcisedheart.info) for more on what this means in practical terms.

various expressions of Judaism. The believing Gentiles have been nurtured and embraced (perhaps with many understandable reservations) by this community through which they have come to learn about the One True God and His Messiah.

So to repeat, if Paul's letter to the Romans is read with the perspective that Paul was a strong Torah observant Jew who most naturally saw the Shema as central to his worldview and even to his eschatological ideology, and coupled to this, if we take on board the strong evidence that the situation in Rome at the time was as highlighted above<sup>7</sup>; then it seems most obvious that Paul was writing to alert these Christ-believing Gentiles to their developing judgmental attitudes, which Paul saw as not only wrong, but most unhelpful for his 'stumbling in faith'<sup>8</sup> (in their faith with respect to who the Messiah was) Jewish brothers and sisters.

If this brief introduction to this very Jewish perspective on the epistle to the Romans has at all piqued your interest, then I strongly recommend that you take the time to read Prof Mark Nanos' 'The Mystery of Romans'. I am sure your time will be amply rewarded.

What questions and what implications does this approach raise?

There are clearly a number of significant challenges here to some central Christian tenets; as well as some great theological and spiritual advantages for Christians who adopt this perspective. There are also some significant advantages and positive outcomes for the Jewish community if this perspective gains credibility.

Among the doctrines that may need a re-think is the exclusiveness of Christianity. It seems very clear that Paul did not teach that Yeshua was the only way. While he clearly believed that being a 'Christ-believing' Jew was the best way to live in these 'end-times', Paul did not see this as the only way and was most confident that ultimately, whether his brethren came to accept that Yeshua was the Messiah or not, the time was imminent when '*All Israel would be saved*' (Rom 11:26).

Also, we can see how Paul was not promoting or starting a new religion, but saw belief in Yeshua as foundational to his view or form of Judaism. Thus, 'Christianity' should really be a sect of Judaism and an absolutely rock-solid supporter and 'sibling' of the State of Israel!

How different would our world then be!?

As an aside, I see the evidence from both a more contextually appropriate, faithful and consistent interpretation of Romans, along with the evidence of the Torah observant reality of the early 'church' in Rome, as actually circumstantial evidence of two other vital truths. They are:

- 1) the truth that Paul's Damascus Road experience really was a vision from heaven and his transformation to the recognition that Yeshua was the Messiah of Israel was genuine; and
- 2) that the Resurrection of Yeshua really happened.

I have expanded on the three sub-groups of the Jewish community that Nanos contends was present in Rome in my article 'The Tripartite Salvation Paradigm'<sup>9</sup>, and on the reality of the Resurrection in my article 'The Resurrection and Jewish Skepticism' (both at [www.circumcisedheart.info](http://www.circumcisedheart.info)).

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<sup>7</sup> "Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44, seems to suggest this, and Ambrosiaster in the 4th cent. in his commentary, *Ad Romanos* (ed. H. J. Vogels, CSEL 81:1), described the earliest Christ-followers in Rome being taught to keep Torah by Christ-following Jews" – as footnoted in 'Mystery of Romans'

<sup>8</sup> 'stumbling in faith' rather than 'weak in faith' in Romans 14:1 for example.

<sup>9</sup> This article is really still in draft form – some constructive criticism would be most welcome.