

concern for My holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations where they went. Therefore say to the house of Israel, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD," declares the Lord GOD, "when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight"' (Ezekiel 36:20-23).

The placement of Ezekiel 36:20-23 within Paul's accusatory remark against Jewish pride in Torah possession, leading to violation of various commandments (more likely via bad attitudes than anything else) on the part of many people—has to be enjoined with the recognition that Ezekiel 36:25-27 does promise forgiveness, restoration, and the promise of a supernatural transcription of God's Instruction onto the hearts of His people via His Spirit.

**25 For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law?**

2:25 Having immediately derided the thought that Jewish possession of the Torah is sufficient to be regarded as justified/righteous before God (vs. 17-24), Paul takes his discussion even further, and derides any Jewish pride or arrogance that may have been associated with the rite of circumcision. For, even though circumcision was undeniably a commandment of the Torah to be followed (Genesis 17:9-14; Leviticus 12:3), and one which the Maccabees rightly fought and died for (1 Maccabees 1:48, 60-61)—by the First Century it also became a significant area of hyper-separation between many Jews and those of the nations at large. So bad had things become, in some quarters, was the thought that with a few exceptions, ethnic, circumcised Israelites were all assured an automatic place in the Kingdom to come (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1), solely because of physical lineage. Some sentiments expressed in *Jubilees* 15:25-26 are worth noting:

"This law is for all the eternal generations and there is no circumcising of days and there is no passing a single day beyond eight days because it is an eternal ordinance ordained and written in the heavenly tablets. And anyone who is born whose own flesh is not circumcised on the eighth day is not from the sons of the covenant which the LORD made for Abraham since (he is) from the children of destruction. And there is therefore no sign upon him so that he might belong to the LORD because (he is destined) to be destroyed and annihilated from the earth and to be uprooted from the earth because he has broken the covenant of the LORD our God."<sup>75</sup>

To counter many of these thoughts. Paul asserts, "Circumcision is indeed worthwhile if you keep the *Torah*; but if you break the *Torah*, your circumcision has become uncircumcision" (TLV). Here, the verb *ōpheleō* (ὠφελέω) is used, widely meaning "to be of service to, to benefit" (LS),<sup>76</sup> rendered as "of value" (NASU) or "worthwhile" (TLV) or "profitable" (NKJV). If a Jewish male, circumcised from eight days of age, is to at all demonstrate himself worthy of the rite of circumcision—then proper obedience to God, reflective of His character, should be shown. Far too frequently, Jewish confidence in

<sup>75</sup> O.S. Wintermute, trans., "Jubilees," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol 2, 87.

<sup>76</sup> LS, 909.

circumcision, and possession of circumcision, would be insufficient when one might otherwise, most probably, be found to break or violate the Torah in some way. Dunn further summarizes,

“The climatic focus on circumcision is a measure both of the degree to which it marked out distinctive Jewish identity and of the dangers to which the typical Jew was exposed by over-reliance on it. To set such a value on ethnic identity and outward ritual is of a piece with the presumptuous wisdom of 1:22 and so draws the interlocutor under the same indictment of impiety and unrighteousness (1:18).”<sup>77</sup>

**2:26-27** Paul asks what appear to be some rather scathing questions to Jews who are confident that their circumcision will guarantee them something special. He details, “So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law” (NRSV). This concerns non-Jewish people, who are uncircumcised, observing *ta dikaiōmata tou nomou* (τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου), “the precepts of the law” (RSV/ESV), most probably pertaining to the kind of key, foundational commandments Paul has just elaborated upon (vs. 21-22). Even if Paul intends his remark to be taken rhetorically or hypothetically, those presumed heathen—who live upstanding lives in conformity to a basic Torah code of ethics and morality—possess the ability to judge, as it were, Jewish people who are circumcised, have been reared in a Torah environment, and yet who do not always live up to its code. As Stott puts it, “Circumcision minus obedience equals uncircumcision, while uncircumcision plus obedience equals circumcision.”<sup>78</sup> What Paul communicates in vs. 26-27 is most consistent with Jeremiah 9:25-26:

“Behold, the days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘that I will punish all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised—Egypt and Judah, and Edom and the sons of Ammon, and Moab and all those inhabiting the desert who clip the hair on their temples; for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart.”

**28 For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.**

**2:28-29** Romans 2:28-29 is a place where it is commonly asserted that non-Jewish Believers can possibly be viewed as some sort of “spiritual Jews.” Even though not born Jewish in the flesh, or perhaps even physically circumcised, such people may be perceived as having a “Jewish heart” via their faith in the Jewish Messiah.

It is difficult to avoid how there is obviously a connection made in the text, where the Greek *Ioudaios* (Ἰουδαῖος) serves to represent the Hebrew *Yehudah* (יהודה), which on the basis of Genesis 29:35<sup>79</sup> and 49:8,<sup>80</sup> is widely regarded to mean “to give thanks, laud, praise” (*TWOT*).<sup>81</sup> The true “Jew,” is one who can have praises issued from the God of Israel, the Creator, and not other mortals:

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<sup>77</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 28a:119.

<sup>78</sup> Stott, 93.

<sup>79</sup> “And she conceived again and bore a son and said, ‘This time I will praise the LORD.’ Therefore she named him Judah. Then she stopped bearing” (Genesis 29:35).

<sup>80</sup> “Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down to you” (Genesis 49:8).

<sup>81</sup> Paul R. Gilchrist, “יהודה,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:369.

“For one is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision something visible in the flesh. Rather, the Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart—in Spirit not in letter. His praise is not from men, but from God” (TLV).

Interpreters, whether lay readers or even some professional expositors, tend to be divided, as to whether or not the person who is *Ioudaios* in view in Romans 2:28-29, is simply among the many Jewish people who constituted the community of Messiah followers in Rome, or how any person regardless of ethnicity who trusts in the Jewish Messiah may be regarded as “Jewish,” likely in some sort of connection to Him. Not surprisingly, both views of Romans 2:28-29, are detectable within our contemporary Messianic movement.

One who is reflective of the view that non-Jewish Believers may actually be regarded as “spiritual Jews” to some degree, is D. Thomas Lancaster, in his book *Grafted In*:

Paul implies a difference between legal Israel and Kingdom Israel in Romans 2 when he distinguishes between one who is only Jewish “outwardly,” according to the flesh, and one who is Jewish inwardly:

For he is not a Jew who is so outwardly, neither is circumcision that which is outward in flesh; but a Jew is he who is so inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart, in spirit, not in letter, of which the praise is not of men, but of God. (Romans 2:28-29 YLT)

Paul concedes that a Gentile who is a Jew “inwardly” and therefore part of Kingdom Israel (but not legal Israel) has no legal standing in Israel in the eyes of men. Therefore, his “praise is not of men, but of God.”<sup>82</sup>

In his *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, Stern actually devotes several pages to Romans 2:28-29 (pp 336-340), which in his JNT/CJB are rendered as:

“For the real Jew is not merely Jewish outwardly: true circumcision is not only external and physical. On the contrary, the real Jew is one inwardly; and true circumcision is of the heart, spiritual not literal; so that his praise comes not from other people but from God.”

In reviewing some of Stern’s remarks, it is not quite clear where he stands on the audience being addressed in these verses. He first makes the attestation that these statements by Paul should be read with people who are actually Jewish in mind, but then wavers a bit:

“It is obvious that in v. 28 the people spoken of as *not* real Jews are in fact born Jews, for no one needs to be told that Gentiles are not Jews. But in this passage, exactly who *is* a real Jew? Is Sha’ul talking about born Jews who are also born again (Yn [John] 3:3), that is, about Messianic Jews? Or is he making a radical and dramatic assertion that some Gentiles (as well as some born Jews) are actually Jews in God’s sight by virtue of being Jews inwardly, having circumcised hearts that offer praise to God? In other words, is he saying that both Messianic Jews and Gentile Christians are Jews?”<sup>83</sup>

As he deliberates on the various options presented to the interpreter, Stern bears a reliance on the Medieval Jewish PaRDeS hermeneutic, thinking that while literally it is impossible for non-Jewish Believers in Israel’s Messiah to be regarded as “Jewish,” spiritually it is something possible to consider:

<sup>82</sup> D. Thomas Lancaster, *Grafted In: Israel, Gentiles, and the Mystery of the Gospel* (Marshfield, MO: First Fruits of Zion, 2009), 6.

<sup>83</sup> Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 338.

“Carrying many new ideas in his head, Sha’ul could produce a sentence that had both a simple sense (*p’shat*) and a hint (*remez*) of something more profound; furthermore he would not be averse to making an allegorical or homiletical application (*drash*) of his own words or looking in them for a secret meaning (*sod*); because these four ways of interpreting texts were well known among educated Jews...

“Thus a born-again Gentile, one who has come to faith in the God of Israel through trusting Yeshua the Messiah, is indeed a Jew inwardly; his heart is circumcised even though his flesh is not; he is a true God-praiser, whose praise comes from God and not from other people—in many senses a real Jew...”<sup>84</sup>

Stern takes some serious liberties, such as assuming that the PaRDeS hermeneutic was even in usage in the First Century C.E., when by all accounts while *midrash* was, PaRDeS was not.<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, this part of the Epistle to the Romans is plainly, by the text of the letter itself, directed to a sub-audience: “if you bear the name ‘Jew’ and rely upon the Law and boast in God” (v. 17). Or as Stern himself has rendered it in his JNT/CJB: “if you call yourself a Jew and rest on *Torah* and boast about God.” The Apostle Paul communicated to a broad and mixed Jewish and non-Jewish audience in Rome, and there should be no doubt that certain parts of his message concerned more Jewish concerns, and other parts concerned more localized Roman issues.

While there are those who think that non-Jewish Believers in Yeshua, as some sort of “spiritual Jews,” are in view for Romans 2:28-29—there are others, commenting specifically from a Messianic perspective, and recognizing the mixed audience of Jewish, Greek and Roman Messiah followers among the assemblies in Rome—who think that the Jewish Believers in Rome are specifically being addressed here. This is a sub-group in Paul’s letter which Paul specifically admonished, as he emphasized that personal “Jewishness,” including the distinction of being physically circumcised from the time of birth, is not enough for them to be regarded highly by God. This is especially true when the tenor of Romans 2:14-16 is considered, and how various people from the nations—and some think even pagans who have sought God only via His natural revelation in Creation at large (cf. 1:19-20)—are shown to be more obedient to His Instruction than various Jewish people:

“For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Messiah Yeshua.”

Jewish people must possess a stellar personal character—one which is embodied by the proper name *Yehudah/loudaios*—and receive accolades **not** from any of their fellow human beings because they are Jewish and circumcised, but from God Himself. In his commentary on Romans, Hegg is reflective of this position:

“What is Paul saying...? First, let’s remember that he is addressing the Jewish constituents within the Roman synagoague [sic] at this point in the chapter. His reference to the Gentile who keeps the Torah [Romans 2:27] is simply a way to rebuke and shame the Jews who were insincere in their pursuit of God. Secondly, he is speaking within the sphere of Jewishness, and asserts the same axiom which he speaks plainly in 9:6, namely, that not all physical (outward) descendants of Jacob are actually (inward) Israel. For Paul, it cannot merely be physical lineage which makes a person Jewish—there must be more. If ‘not every descendant from Israel is Israel’ (9:6), who is a descendant of Israel? Paul’s answer is that there must be circumcision of the heart to match the physical circumcision, or there is no value whatsoever in the physical circumcision. Physical

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>85</sup> Consult the FAQ, “PaRDeS.”

lineage has value, even apart from faith, for the descendants of Jacob still comprise the chosen nation of God. What is more, the temporal blessings of the covenant (and these should not be minimized) remain the possession of the nation of Israel, even in their unbelief. But Paul is emphasizing the eternal promises of the covenant ('whose praise is not from men, but from God'), which are the possession only of those who believe and are therefore righteous. These are those who are circumcised both in flesh and in heart (cf. Ezek 44:7-9).

"The circumcision of the heart is a Torah concept (cf. Lev 26:41; Dt 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4, 9:26), and apart from it the Jewish person fares no better than the pagan before the bar of God's justice. The circumcision of the flesh, which marks him as a covenant member and therefore the recipient of God's blessing, apart from the corresponding circumcision of the heart is considered as though he were no covenant member at all (his circumcision has become uncircumcision) in terms of the eternal promises of the covenant."<sup>86</sup>

Another voice to be considered, who looks at Romans 2:28-29 not from the perspective of a non-Jewish Greek or Roman Messiah follower actually being a "spiritual Jew"—but instead that Paul's words are directed to admonish the Jewish Messiah followers in Rome—is seen in Mark D. Nanos' statements in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. He first comments on Romans 2:28, "For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical" (NRSV),

"Paul refers to the ideals to which circumcised flesh for Jewish males bears witness: *For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly*, lit., 'for the Jew is not (ultimately) the one conspicuously known to be (a Jew)'; *nor is true* (Gk. lacks 'true') *circumcision something external and physical*, lit. 'nor is the one known to be circumcised in the flesh thereby necessarily the ideal Jew.'"<sup>87</sup>

Nanos goes on, in commenting on Romans 2:29, "Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God" (NRSV), how true Jewish character is expressed from the heart:

(Romans 2:29, Grk: *ou gar ho en tō phanerō Ioudaios estin oude hē en tō phanerō en sarki peritomē* [οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερωῖ Ἰουδαῖός ἐστιν οὐδὲ ἡ ἐν τῷ φανερωῖ ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομή]; "for~not the outwardly Jew he is nor the outwardly in flesh circumcision" [Brown and Comfort].)<sup>88</sup>

"Paul's point is not that Gentiles are the true Jews, or that the foreskinned are the true or real circumcision; quite the opposite: the terms 'Jew' and 'circumcision' are reserved for Israelites. *Real circumcision* (Gk lacks 'real'); *it is spiritual and not literal*, lit., 'by spirit (made manifest in the way one lives), not by inscription (i.e., not [merely] by a cut into the flesh).' Thus this verse could be translated: Rather, the deepest character of the Jew, even the purpose of circumcision, is about the spirit, the intentions of the heart (at work through the way one lives who is so marked), not (merely) inscribed (in flesh) (as if a mark alone fully defined who one is)."<sup>89</sup>

While the circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; cf. Ezekiel 36:26), is surely something which is universal—not only to Jewish, Greek, and Roman males, **but also** to females—to assert from Romans 2:28-29 that non-Jewish people can be "spiritual Jews," is to misapply the text. The purpose of Paul, here in his letter, was to actually issue some admonitions to various Jewish Messiah followers in Rome, who may have looked at their circumcision status as one of superiority and pride. To the Apostle Paul, a true Jewish person was one who could receive praise from God, and should

<sup>86</sup> Hegg, *Romans 1-8*, pp 57-58.

<sup>87</sup> Nanos, in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 259.

<sup>88</sup> Brown and Comfort, 537.

<sup>89</sup> Nanos, in *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 259.

rightly not take any accolades from mortals—who may be prone to fawn over them for being Jewish and circumcised from birth—because Paul himself certainly did not (Philippians 3:5), as his status was based firmly in what the Messiah had accomplished for him.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Consult the author's article "The Faithfulness of Yeshua the Messiah," appearing in *The New Testament Validates Torah*.