

# ROMANS 3

## COMMENTARY

**1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? 2 Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.**

**3:1** With the material of ch. 2 having just explained how the Jewish people are every bit as much sinners as the nations at large, and that possession of the Torah will not merit some sort of special favors before God—Paul now needs to address how God is not unfair in His dealings with His own Jewish people. Yet, even if Jewish people are sinners the same as the pagans, and they need redemption too, this does not all of a sudden mean that there is no special distinction in being Jewish. While circumcision of the heart is something which every Jewish person must have to be considered a true “Jew” (2:28-29), it is not as though physical circumcision has no important value to it. Being a First Century Jewish person, descended from the Patriarch Abraham and the Ancient Israelites who stood at the base of Mount Sinai, is something of significant value and importance! And perhaps more important, as Yeshua Himself would say, is “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22)—and Paul himself was a Jewish Believer who took the implications of this very, very seriously in his ministry (as it is arguably the most important distinct trait of the Jewish people).

It is widely recognized that what is seen in ch. 3 is issued in the form of diatribe. According to John R.W. Stott, “Paul’s method of handling Jewish objections to his teaching takes the form of a ‘diatribe’...a literary convention well known to the ancient world. In it a teacher would set up a dialogue with his critics or students, first posing and then answering their questions.”<sup>1</sup> This is going to be especially important to keep in mind, per various approaches to vs. 7-8. Rhetorically in this piece of Paul’s composition, it needs to be weighed whether or not Paul even uses the first person to talk about himself, or someone more-or-less hypothetical.

Paul opens this section to the Romans, obviously directed to the Jewish Believers, “Then what is the advantage of being Jewish? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?” (TLV). Here he employs the term *ōphēleia* (ὠφέλεια), often meaning “*utility, use, profit, advantage, benefit*” (LS),<sup>2</sup> with the verb *ōphēleō* (ὠφελέω) having been previously used in 2:25: “For indeed circumcision is of value [*ōphēleō*] if you practice the Law...” Even though circumcision was insufficient to claim special favors before God—and would not at all assure Jewish people a place in the Kingdom to come—Paul does have to interject that Jewish circumcision does still possess a special value, which he will pick up on later in his letter (9:4-5).

**3:2** Being Jewish and circumcised does bring with it some important distinction, according to the Apostle Paul. As he asserts, “Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God” (RSV). While this is doubtlessly important, it has to be recognized how the verb *pisteuō* (πιστεύω), often meaning something like “to have faith,” is employed here for “entrusted” (RSV/NRSV/ESV, NASU, NIV/TNIV), with “committed” (KJV/NKJV) a rather poor rendering. This is

<sup>1</sup> Stott, 95.

<sup>2</sup> LS, 909.

because, as James R. Edwards explains, “Paul does not say...that God *gave* his words to Israel, but that God *entrusted* them to Israel. This shifts the emphasis from ownership to stewardship, from possession of the law to responsibility to it.”<sup>3</sup> He points readers’ attention to the Isaiah 49:6<sup>4</sup> mandate of Israel being a light to the world.

What did Paul specifically intend by saying that Ancient Israel and the First Century Jewish community were entrusted with “the oracles of God,” *ta logia to Theou* (τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ)? *TDNT* asserts, “In Rom. 3:2 the divine *logia* are specifically but not exclusively God’s promises to Israel,”<sup>5</sup> and this could involve any number of things, mainly involving God formally delivering the Torah to Ancient Israel (Deuteronomy 4:8; 5:22-27; Psalm 147:20; Acts 7:38). While certainly including His Instruction, “the oracles of God” may also be viewed as the anticipation announced by the Prophets of a Messiah to come, and was something to surely affect the world at large. In the estimation of C.E.B. Cranfield,

“It is perhaps best...to take it in the widest sense. The Jews have been given God’s authentic self-revelation in trust to treasure it and to attest and declare it to all mankind. The gospel events and all the *Heilsgeschichte* [Ger. ‘salvation history’] which preceded them and attested them beforehand took place...in the midst of the people. They alone have been the recipients on behalf of mankind of God’s message to mankind.”<sup>6</sup>

It cannot go overlooked how *logia* can also involve various supernatural utterances (Numbers 24:16, LXX; 1 Peter 4:11). With this in mind, while many readers of v. 2 assume things like *ta logia tou Theou* involving the Tanach Scriptures, the singular term *logos* (λόγος) has a wide variety of applications, including things that are “chiefly oral” (*BDAG*).<sup>7</sup> What if Paul has actually included in his statements of Romans 3:1-2, that the Jewish people—in addition to obviously being entrusted with the Instruction and Messianic promises of God—were also granted the *oral explanations* of how much of God’s Instruction is to be properly followed? Many of these traditional explanations could have made their way into Jewish literature like the Mishnah, Tosefta, Talmud, Midrashim, and even Dead Sea Scrolls—which Bible scholars today generally all consult as containing important background material, as at least historical witnesses to ancient opinions.

We see later in on Romans 9:3-4, how Paul speaks of “my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and **the temple service** and the promises.” The term *latreia* (λατρεία) largely relates to cultic worship.<sup>8</sup> Historically speaking, the Synagogue has certainly preserved many traditional liturgies, hymns, and psalms (not necessarily present in the Book of Psalms) originally used in Temple worship that have made their way into the *siddur* (סידור) or prayer book.<sup>9</sup>

Taken together, the Jewish people have historically been given the responsibility of preserving the protocol of proper worship and mainline Torah *halachah*. Yeshua Himself actually bid His disciples to follow the lead of the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-2), even though He did warn them about some of the

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<sup>3</sup> Edwards, 83.

<sup>4</sup> “He says, ‘It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also make You a light of the nations so that My salvation may reach to the end of the earth’” (Isaiah 49:6).

<sup>5</sup> G. Kittel, “*logion*,” in *TDNT*, 515.

<sup>6</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 179.

<sup>7</sup> *BDAG*, 599.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 587.

<sup>9</sup> The valid statements of Daniel C. Juster, *Growing to Maturity* (Denver: The Union of Messianic Jewish Congregations Press, 1987), 228 on the *siddur* need to be recognized here:

“Eighty percent is either direct Scriptural quotation or creative intertwining of Scripture passages....Fifteen percent is prayer material inspired by Scripture....Only a small portion contains anything contrary to Biblical faith.”

leaders' hypocrisy (Matthew 23:3).<sup>10</sup> Because of Judah's leadership affirmed in the Torah (Genesis 49:10), the Jewish people do get to determine a wide degree of the proper way of how the commandments of the Torah are to be interpreted. Today's Messianics should follow—and certainly excel efforts to be knowledgeable—of many of the Jewish interpretations of Moses' Teaching.

Does this mean that the Rabbinical authorities are to be *blindly followed* in all matters? **Of course not.** No astute and intelligent Bible reader thinks that Paul instructing Believers to follow the government, later in Romans ch. 13, means that man-made laws that are in flat defiance of God's will are to be followed. Similarly, any applications of God's Torah seen in the Jewish theological tradition need to be spiritually edifying—as Philippians 4:8 would say, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things”—and be compatible with His mandate of Israel making a difference in the world (Genesis 12:2-3; Deuteronomy 4:5-8). There are Jewish views of the Tanach Scriptures which clearly do subtract from the gospel, and which disregard the Messiahship of Yeshua, that are to surely be disregarded.<sup>11</sup> Yet, one can clearly recognize that the Apostles affirmed that the Jewish religious leadership of their day had an authority—what today we should best call a **consultative authority**, alongside that of leaders in the Body of Messiah (cf. Matthew 16:19)—not to be so casually dismissed. Many of the traditions Judaism has preserved can be considered “Spirit-inspired” to some degree.

As with all issues, though, discernment and wisdom from the Holy Spirit should be able to identify those things which subtract from Yeshua and His atoning work.<sup>12</sup> Much of today's Messianic Judaism has rightfully recognized various areas of Jewish Torah practice, where Yeshua's ministry and teachings and the thrust of the gospel clearly stand in contrast. The majority of Messianic Judaism does not follow an Orthodox level of Torah observance, but one closer to contemporary Conservative or Reform Judaism.

**3 What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? 4 May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar, as it is written, “THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED” [Psalm 51:4].**

3:3 While Paul has just interjected how circumcision and Jewish possession of God's oracles are by no means things without value or distinction, he still has to address the logic of how God is just to regard rebellious Jews as sinners, the same as the rest of humanity. He makes the point, “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?” (RSV). Cranfield is correct: “The sense of the verse as a whole is that it is unthinkable that God's faithfulness to His covenant with Israel should be rendered ineffective even by the Jews' unbelief.”<sup>13</sup> Jewish faithlessness or disobedience to God's Instruction, and a failure to follow His direction, does not all of a sudden mean that the Eternal One is going to not be faithful to what He is committed to. In contemplating the faithfulness of God (*tēn pistin tou Theou*, τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ), we might be led to consider the Genesis 15:1-21 scene of the covenant between the parts, which the Lord Himself is the sole guarantor of. Yet at the same time, God's faithfulness to God's own self, requires Him to judge sin—regardless of who may commit it.

<sup>10</sup> For a further examination, consult the author's exegesis paper on Matthew 23:2-3, “Who Sits in the Seat of Moses?”, appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

<sup>11</sup> For a notable example of this, consult the FAQ, “Ephesians 2:14-15.”

<sup>12</sup> For a further discussion on this and related issues, consult the author's article “The Role of History in Messianic Biblical Interpretation,” appearing in his book *Confronting Critical Issues*.

<sup>13</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 181.

**3:4** The God of Israel is One who will be steadfast, as testified by Paul: “Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, ‘So that you may be justified in your words, and prevail in your judging’” (NRSV). Here, the intertextual Tanach references made by him need to be recognized. Psalm 116:11, for example, states, “I said in my alarm, ‘All men are liars,’” as too frequently the claims that human beings make of God—especially the view that God will not judge sinners *of His own people*—is quantitatively false. Of special importance here is Paul’s specific appeal to Psalm 51:4: “Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.” (V. 4 actually includes a reference from the Septuagint.)<sup>14</sup> This verse itself was originally given in dialogue after King David’s sin with Bathsheba, where he acknowledged his guilt and that God’s judgment was appropriate to his crime. In a much broader sense, pertaining to Ancient Israel and the Jewish people as a whole, Paul’s main point may be complimented by the sentiment expressed in the post-exilic words of Nehemiah 9:32-33:

“Now therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and lovingkindness, do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You, which has come upon us, our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers and on all Your people, from the days of the kings of Assyria to this day. However, You are just in all that has come upon us; for You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.”

**5 But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) 6 May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? 7 But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? 8 And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.**

**3:5-6** Vs. 5-8 need to be followed a bit closely, especially given the presence of diatribe in Romans ch. 3. The question is asked, “But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say?” (v. 5a, ESV), with Paul as author most probably asking on behalf of his own Jewish people as “we.” If Paul’s Jewish people are disobedient to God’s Instruction, and a solution is brought forth via Yeshua the Messiah, what does this mean? A second question is asked, “That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?” (v. 5b, ESV). Following this, another statement is interjected: *kata anthrōpon legō* (κατὰ ἄνθρωπον λέγω), “I am speaking in human terms” (v. 5c, NASU) or “I am using a human argument” (NIV). Recognizing the placement of this statement will be critical to evaluating what is communicated in vs. 7-8.

The conclusion to be drawn, from the inquiry that God is not unrighteous to judge the rebellious of His own Jewish people, is that if God does not judge them, “If that were so, how could God judge the world?” (v. 6, NIV), as He will surely be fair in His dealings with all people.

**3:7** Recognizing the human disposition Paul intends by these statements (v. 5c), it is asserted, “But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?” (ESV). Some have thought that Paul is speaking of himself here, but it is far more probable, and widely recognized, that the first person “I” of v. 7 is a hypothetical person making a statement. John Calvin asserted early in the Reformation, for example, “There is no doubt that this objection is brought

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<sup>14</sup> “Against you alone did I sin, and what is evil before you I did, so that you may be justified in your words and be victorious when you go to law” (Psalm 51:4, NETS).

forward in the person of the ungodly.”<sup>15</sup> Cranfield also asserts, “the use of the first person singular is simply rhetorical.”<sup>16</sup> Why, for example, if in the sin and falsehood demonstrated by a Jewish person faithless to God’s Instruction, should such a person even be judged—especially if a good thing like God’s righteousness being manifested and/or the Messiah coming on the scene results from it? Stott further observes,

“*Someone might argue*, Paul continues, and goes on to develop the previous argument. In doing so, he also impersonates the objector by using the first person singular. *If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness*, just as our unrighteousness displays God’s righteousness more brightly (5), *and so increases his glory*, then surely God ought to be pleased, even grateful? Am I not doing him a service?”<sup>17</sup>

The point being made is that Jewish sinners being used to highlight the magnificence and faithfulness of God, **does not all of a sudden** mean that such people can be given an “out” when it comes to judgment of their sin. Jewish ethnicity does not guarantee an exit from punishment for offenses against God.

**3:8** Paul actually uses some of these rhetorical statements, to counter some false word that had apparently been circulating about him and his ministry. He communicates, “Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—‘Let us do evil that good may result’? Their condemnation is deserved” (NIV). The idea that sinful behavior, revealing God’s righteousness in the arrival of the Messiah on the scene, is something appropriate (perhaps even to be commended!) and will not be punished—is considered to be extreme slander against Paul’s ministry. Anyone making such a claim of Paul, according to him, was worthy of firm condemnation.

**9 What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; 10 as it is written, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; 11 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; 12 ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE [Psalm 14:1-3; 51:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20]. 13 THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE [Psalm 5:9], WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING, THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS [Psalm 140:3]; 14 WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS [Psalm 10:7]; 15 THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD, 16 DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS, 17 AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN [Psalm 59:7-8]. 18 THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES” [Psalm 36:1].**

**3:9** The main thrust of Romans ch. 1 has been to describe the sinfulness and rebellion of the nations at large toward the Creator God. The main thrust of Romans ch. 2 into ch. 3 has been to describe the similar sinfulness and rebellion of Paul’s own Jewish people. So, the eminent Apostle asks, “What then? Are we better than they? No, not at all. For we have already made the case that all—both Jewish and Greek people—are under sin” (TLV). The plural pronoun “we” employed here, is contextually compatible with Paul speaking in terms of “we Jews” (RSV)—although it needs to be remembered that Paul is probably including himself among this “we,” as one who has been individually condemned as a guilty sinner (at at least one point in his life). Most especially poignant here, given the litany of Tanach quotations which will follow in vs. 10-18, is that the accusations brought forward about the sinfulness of people regard *pantas hup’ hamartian* (πάντας ὑφ’ ἁμαρτίαν), “all are under sin” (the RSV/NRSV actually has “under the power of sin”), **a universal condition** not limited to any sector.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, 63.

<sup>16</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 185.

<sup>17</sup> Stott, 97; cf. Wright, *NIB*, 454.

Further on in Paul's letter, he will detail the condition of a person subjected to being "under sin" (7:13-14): namely one who knows what God's high and holy standard is, but who just cannot seem to implement it in his life. Elsewhere in Paul's writings, it is important for readers of Romans to recognize that all of humanity suffering from the effects and bondage of sin—and also the consequences of sin if not rectified via the good news—is a major theme of his ministry service. This specifically involves Believers from the nations turning away from idolatry, and toward the God of Israel:

"Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor *the* covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

"You know that when you were pagans, *you were* led astray to the mute idols, however you were led" (1 Corinthians 12:2).

"However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods" (Galatians 4:8).

"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest" (Ephesians 2:1-3).

**3:10-18** As the series of appeals to the Tanach or Old Testament will be made, it is useful to keep in mind Job's inquiry: "How then can a man be just with God? Or how can he be clean who is born of woman?" (Job 25:4). One can also detect sentiments such as those witnessed in 4 Ezra 7:22-24: "Nevertheless they were not obedient, and spoke against him; they devised for themselves vain thoughts, and proposed to themselves wicked frauds; they even declared that the Most High does not exist, and they ignored his ways! They scorned his law, and denied his covenants; they have been unfaithful to his statutes, and have not performed his works." The DSS especially include similar remarks, as will be witnessed in vs. 10-18, with appeals made to the Tanach to emphasize the sinfulness of people:

"They continually speak abhorrent things against them. 'All of them are kindlers and lighters of brands' (Isa. 50:11); 'the webs of a spider are their webs and the eggs of vipers are their eggs' (Isa. 59:5). Whoever touches them shall not be clean. The more he does so, the more he is guilty, unless he is forced. For in times past, God punished their deeds and His wrath burned against their misdeeds, for 'they are a people without insight' (Isa. 27:11); 'they are a people wandering in counsel, for there is no insight in them' (Deut. 32:38)" (CD 5.13-17).<sup>18</sup>

Craig S. Keener appropriately summarizes the importance of vs. 10-18, not only for theologically establishing the significance of human sin—but also for how important this section of Romans demonstrates the Apostle Paul's ability to quote and apply the Tanach:

"In 3:10-18 Paul piles up texts (most of them from the Psalms) about the common sinfulness of humanity. Apart from a few collections of ancient texts (such as at Qumran), few directly linked texts at such great length as here, and even the longer collections often addressed sections of

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<sup>18</sup> Wise, Abegg, and Cook, pp 56-57.

Scripture rather than topics, and rarely 'blended' diverse texts into a medley. Yet just as Jewish midrash regularly linked texts based on a common key word or concept, Paul links all these texts not only by their reference to sin but by other means as well. First, some of these texts allude somehow to death (3:13ac, 15-17), a theme that will recur (5:12, 14, 17, 21; 6:16, 21, 23; 7:5, 10, 13, 24; 8:6). Second, most allude to body parts: eyes (3:18), feet (3:15-17), and perhaps appropriately first and at greatest length, the mouth (3:13-14). Mention of parts of the body might prepare for Paul's later treatment of 'flesh' (cf. 6:6; 7:5, 24-25; 8:10, 13; Col 3:5).<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, in reviewing the quotations issued in vs. 10-18, one is prepared to consider some of these themes further elaborated upon, in various ways, in Paul's letter. We would be right to place ourselves into the position of an ancient Roman Believer, sitting in a fellowship group, hearing Paul's epistle being audibly read—and within the course of around ninety minutes or so, consider how these statements would affect later instruction delivered.

**3:10-12** Having just asserted that all people are under sin, Paul begins his substantiation of this by stating, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one" (NRSV). While it might be thought that these quotations do not align exactly with the Hebrew Tanach, or perhaps are taken from the Greek Septuagint, it would seem more likely that this first section in vs. 10-12 is an amalgamation of a number of passages:

"For the choir director. *A Psalm* of David. The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good. The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 14:1-3).

"For the choir director; according to Mahalath. *A Maskil* of David. The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God,' they are corrupt, and have committed abominable injustice; there is no one who does good. God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there is anyone who understands, who seeks after God. Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one" (Psalm 53:1-3).

"Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins" (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

The claim made by Paul here is certainly echoed elsewhere in the Apostolic Scriptures. James 3:2 says, "For we all stumble in many *ways*. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well." 1 John 1:8 also states, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." Sin is present in all people. Or, sin may at least be regarded as a reality of Planet Earth which needs to be recognized, confronted, and sought to be defeated when encountered.

**3:13-14** The futility of sinful humanity is compounded, with two quotations issued in v. 13: "Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues they keep deceiving. The poison of vipers is under their lips" (TLV). Psalm 5:9, the first verse appealed to here, more fully says, "There is nothing reliable in what they say; their inward part is destruction *itself*. Their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue." And, as is said in Psalm 140:3, about the enemies of God, "They sharpen their tongues as

<sup>19</sup> Keener, pp 54-55.

a serpent; poison of a viper is under their lips.” While previously (vs. 10-12), the claims made describe human worthlessness in the view of people not doing too much good on their own, here it is specified that people are, basically, poisonous liars. It is further stated in v. 14, “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness” (RSV), with an allusion made to Psalm 10:7: “His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression; under his tongue is mischief and wickedness.”

**3:15-17** The behavior of sinners is principally known in activities such as murder, consequences such as destruction, and a complete ignorance of peace: “Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know” (RSV). Vs. 15-17 include two Tanach quotes:

“Their feet run to evil, and they hasten to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity, devastation and destruction are in their highways. They do not know the way of peace, and there is no justice in their tracks; they have made their paths crooked, whoever treads on them does not know peace” (Isaiah 59:7-8).

“For their feet run to evil and they hasten to shed blood” (Proverbs 1:16).

**3:18** The final, summarizing remark, detailing humanity’s sin and rebellion, is very simply: “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (RSV). This alludes to Psalm 36:1, “For the choir director. A Psalm of David the servant of the LORD. Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes.” Essentially, people in their fallen condition, rejecting God and His ways, **and without fear of God**, do not fear the commensurate punishment that will befall them without repentance. And keep in mind: what Paul has just said in vs. 10-18 is directed to both Jewish *and* non-Jewish people.

**19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; 20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.**

**3:19-20** Romans 3:19-20 are two verses which can catch many of today’s Messianic readers completely off guard, not only because of some traditional understandings which have been challenged by some contemporary examiners (in particular, proposals seen in the New Perspective of Paul), but most especially because of some translation issues present from the Greek into English. The rendering of the clause *en tō nomō* (ἐν τῷ νόμῳ) in v. 19 as “under the Law” is quite unfortunate, as it is more properly “in the law” (YLT), “within the Law” (LITV), “inside the Law” (Moffat New Testament), or “within the *Torah*” (TLV)—namely describing those who decisively sit within the sphere of influence of God’s Torah.

Furthermore, for evaluating what is intended in v. 20, is whether “works of the Law” (*ergōn nomou*, ἔργων νόμου) pertains to “observing the law” (TNIV), or is somehow connected to the *ma’asei haTorah* (מעשי התורה) of the Dead Sea Scrolls document 4QMMT, the Qumran community’s selective *halachah* or Torah praxis. If this latter option is considered, then v. 20 does not speak of Jewish people keeping the Torah to “be saved” as it were, but rather how their justification—meaning membership among God’s own community—is not contingent on their self-defined barriers. Instead, the purpose of the Torah (v. 20b) is to reveal the sinfulness of all people, and not be used as a means to separate out Jews from the nations as proverbial haves, with the rest as have-nots.

**3:19** Romans 3:19 can be appropriately viewed as a summarizing statement of what Paul has stated previously in Romans 3:9-18, which continues much of his motif that his own Jewish people are just as much sinners and guilty before the Creator as pagan Greeks and Romans. The good Apostle says, “What then? Are we Jews<sup>20</sup> any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin [*hup’ hamartian einai*, ὑφ’ ἁμαρτίαν εἶναι]” (v. 9, RSV), then substantiating the universal consequences of sin with an entire litany of Tanach quotations:

“[A]s it is written, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE [Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Ecclesiastes 7:20]. THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING, THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS [Psalm 5:9; 140:3]; WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS [Psalm 10:7]; THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD, DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS, AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN [Isaiah 59:7-8; Proverbs 1:16]. THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES [Psalm 36:1]” (vs. 10-18, NASU).<sup>21</sup>

V. 19, as it appears in the RSV, asserts, “we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” Notably absent from the source text is the clause *hupo nomon* (ὑπὸ νόμον) or “under the Law”; what appears instead is *en tō nomō* (ἐν τῷ νόμῳ) or “in the Law.” Everett F. Harrison explains his view of how what is commonly rendered as “Under the law’ is more literally ‘in the law’; so the thought is probably not so much that the Jew is under the law’s authority and dominion in the legal sense as that he is involved in Scripture, which has relevance to him at every point. Otherwise the shift of meaning of *nomos* (law) is very abrupt. Yet the legislative aspect of the law is involved by virtue of being a part of Scripture.”<sup>22</sup> It is inappropriate for many modern English Bibles to have “under the law” for *en tō nomō*,<sup>23</sup> rather than “in/within the law.” Noting the Greek of v. 19, and comparing it to other clauses that appear in the Pauline letters, James D.G. Dunn indicates,

“ὅσα ὁ νόμος λέγει τοῖς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ λαλεῖ [*hosa ho nomos legei tois en tō nomō lalei*], ‘whatever the law says it says to those within the law’; not ‘under the law’ [NIV]—the distinction in Paul’s choice of prepositions should be observed. οἱ ἐν τῷ νόμῳ [*hoi en tō nomō*], ‘those within the law’; cf. οἱ τὸν νόμον ἔχοντες [*hoi ton nomon echontes*], ‘those having the law’ (2:14), οἱ ὑπὸ νόμον [*hoi hupo nomon*], ‘those under the law’ (1 Cor 9:20; Gal 4:5) and οἱ ἐκ νόμον [*hoi ek nomon*], ‘those from the law’ (4:14, 16).”<sup>24</sup>

Dunn’s point is clear enough: the language of Romans 3:19 has “those within the law” and “not ‘under the law.’” The Moffat New Testament actually has a correct rendering here: “Whatever the Law says, we know, it says to those who are **inside the Law**, that every mouth may be shut and all the world made answerable to God.” What is seen in v. 19 is the same as *en nomō* (ἐν νόμῳ) or “in law” appearing previously in 2:12, the addition of the definite article being only a minor difference. However, given the large number of Tanach quotations that Paul has provided in Romans 3:10-18 preceding in Romans 3:19, it is appropriate to identify “law” as involving much more than just the Pentateuch, as the Tanach Scriptures as a whole are more broadly in view. Douglas J. Moo states how, “‘those in the law’ are the Jews, who live within the sphere of the revelation of God given in the

<sup>20</sup> Grk. *proechometha* (προεχόμεθα); “Are we better...?” (NASU). Versions like the RSV, ESV, and CJB add “we Jews,” and this is probably justified. But what immediately follows in the remark *proētiāsametha* (προητιασάμεθα), “we have already charged,” would pertain more to the discussion that Paul is having with his Roman audience as “we.”

<sup>21</sup> Kurt Aland, et. al., *The Greek New Testament, Fourth Revised Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/United Bible Societies, 1998), pp 525-526; cf. Erwin Nestle and Kurt Aland, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 27th Edition* (New York: American Bible Society, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Harrison, in *EXP*, 10:39.

<sup>23</sup> Brown and Comfort, 539, in their interlinear translation, even have the unfortunate “in(under) the law.”

<sup>24</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:152.

Scripture/law,”<sup>25</sup> in that Paul’s own Jewish people who know the Instruction of God, are the very ones who should be quite aware of its condemning function upon every human being as a sinner.

The issue in Romans 3:19 is the fact that God’s Instruction, in both the Torah and the Tanach, communicates to Paul’s Jewish people that the entire world is somehow “accountable” or “guilty” (NKJV) before Him. This is likely because of basic principles of right and wrong impressed on the human psyche via His image (cf. 2:14-15). *Hupodikos* (ὑπόδικος) specifically means, “Under sentence, condemned, liable, subject to prosecution” (AMG)<sup>26</sup>—a status for *pas ho kosmos* (πᾶς ὁ κόσμος) or the whole world. Paul will continue in the next verse, stating, “since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (v. 20b, RSV), but for many Jews of his generation it was turned into various man-made “works of law” intended to separate them out not only from the nations, but even fellow Jews (discussed further). Quite contrary to the thought that only those who are *en tō nomō* or “in the Law” are expected to follow and obey it—the whole world will be held accountable, in some way, for violating God’s Instruction. Tim Hegg’s observations on Romans 3:19 are well taken:

“[U]nder the Torah’ is a bad translation of τοῖς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ [*tois en tō nomō*], which literally would be ‘those in the Torah.’ ‘Under the Torah’ would be ὑπὸ νόμον, *hupo nomon*, which is found in 6:14, 15...[T]he expression here, ‘those who are in the Torah’ should be understood to mean ‘those who possess the Torah’ or ‘those who know the Torah.’ Thus, the phrase repeats the premise already given by Paul that the Jews were the first to possess the Torah (Scriptures) and thus those parts which clearly denote the universal sinfulness of man most surely apply to the nation to which God first revealed this truth.”<sup>27</sup>

If the pagan world of the Greeks and the Romans is to be condemned for violating God’s Torah, then it stands to reason that the Jewish people who knowingly possess the Torah could be found even more condemned. The sacrifice of Yeshua for all people is the only answer to the sin problem that the whole world has: because God’s Law universally condemns everyone to eternal punishment (vs. 22b-26).

Paul’s Jewish people who sat inside of the sphere of the Torah, knowing its statutes, should definitely know that the whole world—including themselves—stands *hupodikos* before the Creator. As Dunn indicates, “his object is...to show that their own scriptures place his own people just as firmly ‘in the dock’ along with everyone else.”<sup>28</sup> Given the thought of many First Century Jews that ethnicity, likely including possession of the Torah (cf. 2:17), guaranteed them a place in the world to come (m.*Sanhedrin* 10:1), Paul’s reorientation in Romans chs. 1-3 as the Torah chiefly defining and issuing appropriate penalties for sin could have been met with some hostility. Yet, Paul appeals to the words of the Torah and Tanach to substantiate this reality. Cranfield concludes,

“[E]verything which the OT says (including the things which are said about Gentiles) is indeed addressed in the first instance to the Jews and is intended for their instruction, so that, so far from imagining themselves excepted from its condemnations of human sinfulness, they ought to accept them as applying first and foremost to themselves.”<sup>29</sup>

**3:20** There is a significant purpose to the Torah, as Paul explains in v. 20: “because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.” The intention of the Torah, “for through the *Torah* comes awareness of sin” (TLV), is something that Paul will be elaborating upon more fully in his discussions of ch. 7 of the condemned sinner searching for help and resolution. Much discussion has taken place in recent years, however, regarding what Paul

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<sup>25</sup> Moo, 205.

<sup>26</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, ed., *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 1422.

<sup>27</sup> Hegg, *Romans 1-8*, 69.

<sup>28</sup> Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:152.

<sup>29</sup> Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 196.

means concerning *ex ergōn nomou ou dikaiōthēsetai* (ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιοθήσεται). What are “works of the Law”? How are readers to approach “justification”? Traditionally, v. 20 has been viewed from the perspective of meaning that “no person will be acquitted in his sight on the score of obedience to law” (Moffat New Testament). Yet, this has been significantly shifting among various interpreters—especially within the Messianic movement—to regard instead Jewish *halachah* or Torah application, reckoning people as members of God’s covenant people, with “justification” *here* not meaning some sort of pronouncement of innocence for human sin.

There continue to be Romans interpreters<sup>30</sup> who will certainly view “works of law” from the customary view of it pertaining to general obedience or adherence to the Torah. V. 20 would then communicate how human observance of the Torah cannot provide justification, viewed as meaning salvation. While this is Biblically a true concept, is this what v. 20 is saying? A significant alternative to “works of law” or *ergōn nomou* (ἔργων νόμου) meaning obedience/observance of the Torah, which is present in many sectors of the Messianic movement, is based on Cranfield’s view that “works of law” is Paul’s language for legalism. As he summarizes,

“[T]he Greek language of Paul’s day possessed no word-group corresponding to our ‘legalism’, ‘legalist’ and ‘legalistic’. This means that he lacked a convenient terminology for expressing a vital distinction, and so was surely seriously hampered in the work of clarifying the Christian position with regard to the law. In view of this, we should always, we think, be ready to reckon with the possibility that Pauline statements, which at first sight seem to disparage the law, were really not directed against the law itself but against that misunderstanding and misuse of it for which we now have a convenient terminology.”<sup>31</sup>

Messianic Jewish theologian David H. Stern, following Cranfield, in both his *Jewish New Testament Commentary* and *Complete Jewish Bible* publications, has accepted the view that *ergōn nomou* involves some kind of legalism. Stern remarks, “I submit that in every instance ‘*erga nomou*’ means not deeds done in virtue of following the *Torah* the way God intended, but deeds done in consequence of perverting the *Torah* into a set of rules which, it is presumed, can be obeyed mechanically, automatically, *legalistically*, without having faith, without having trust in God, without having love for God or man, and without being empowered by the Holy Spirit.”<sup>32</sup> A verse like Romans 3:20 appears in the CJB as, “For in his sight no one alive will be considered righteous on the ground of legalistic observance of *Torah* commands, because what *Torah* really does is show people how sinful they are.” Stern has done an admirable job in opening up alternative views of *ergōn nomou* to people within the Messianic community.

In the past two decades or so, however, various New Testament scholars have recognized that there is a likely connection between Paul’s usage of the Greek *ergōn nomou* (ἔργων νόμου), and the Hebrew *ma’asei haTorah* (מעשי התורה), appearing in the Dead Sea Scrolls document 4QMMT. The final stanza of 4QMMT says that “Now we have written to you some of the works of the Law [Heb. *miqsat ma’asei ha-Torah*, התורה מעשי], those which we determined would be beneficial for you and your people, because we have seen [that] you possess insight and knowledge of the Law” (4Q399).<sup>33</sup> When reading through this document, what one sees are some of the principles that defined the Qumran community. They thought that when you performed these “works of law”—as defined by them—that you would be blessed and considered righteous by God.

<sup>30</sup> Moo, pp 211-217; Kruse, pp 173-176.

<sup>31</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979), 853.

<sup>32</sup> Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 537.

<sup>33</sup> Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 364.

In reading the complete text of 4QMMT, one sees that “works of law” were not, actually, some kind of macro-Jewish identity markers such as the Sabbath, appointed times, dietary laws, or circumcision, as various interpreters like James D.G. Dunn or N.T. Wright have often extrapolated. These appear to have been assigned somewhat arbitrarily by New Testament scholars. On the contrary, what one sees is a strict, sectarian style of *halachah*, not only focused on purity—but a praxis that will inevitably keep more people out of God’s community than welcome people into it. The “works of law” may be considered as some kind of micro-Jewish identity markers, specific to the group or sect that held them to be important. The issue in 4QMMT, in a manner of speaking, **is the club rules of the Qumran community**, which they felt were the proper interpretation and application of the Torah. Dunn actually concurs, “‘deeds of the law’ denote the interpretations of the Torah which marked out the Qumran community as distinctive, the obligations which members took upon themselves as members and by which they maintained their membership.”<sup>34</sup> N.T. Wright offers a further and more detailed explanation:

“The (sectarian) code of MMT is designed to say, ‘Do *these* particular “works of Torah,” and they will mark you out in the present as the true covenant people.’ These ‘works’ in question in MMT were not sabbath, food laws and circumcision...Rather, the particular and very specific codes in MMT include various aspects of ritual performance (the calendar, regulations about water, marriage laws and so on), some of which were markers against Gentiles, but most of which were markers designed to demonstrate membership of the particular sect, the people that believed itself to be the inauguration of God’s new covenant people. What the author is saying is: these ‘works of Torah’ will bring upon you God’s reckoning of righteousness’ here and now, and that verdict will be repeated ‘on the last day.’”<sup>35</sup>

Traditionalists argue that “works of law” simply means obeying the Mosaic Torah by rote. NPP advocates, in light of the evidence that 4QMMT provides, would argue that *ma’asei haTorah* employed here is “simply a sectarian and more particularist expression” (Dunn)<sup>36</sup> than how Paul would have used *ergōn nomou* in a more general sense to concern broad Jewish identity markers. Among Messianic interpreters, and taking into consideration the material of 4QMMT, Hegg observes,

“[T]hat there were those, who though recognizing the need for God’s mercy, nonetheless felt that their association within the people-group Israel *as they defined Israel* was the all-important factor in having a righteous status before God. For the Qumran sect, their entrance requirements (their particular *halachah* which distinguished them from other sects) were the ‘works of the Torah’ necessary to become part of the ‘*yachad*’ (unity, society, or the true expression of Israel [1QSa 1.1, 28]) and thus to be reckoned as righteous...However, for Paul, people-group status was not the basis for right standing before God, but rather Messiah-status, being ‘in Messiah’ was the requirement.”<sup>37</sup>

A main, significant purpose of God’s Torah is to reveal the sinfulness of human people: “The law simply shows us how sinful we are” (NLT). It was not to be turned into various “works of law” which would keep outsiders to Israel excluded from God’s purpose, which in the context of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, mainly involved the non-Jewish Believers being errantly persuaded that they had to become circumcised as proselytes to be fully accepted and received as members of God’s own. And here in v. 20, in his communication to the Romans, “works of the law” representing a Jewish exclusive claim to

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<sup>34</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 204.

<sup>35</sup> N.T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan & Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 146.

He continues in his remarks, stating, “The works in question will not *earn* their performers their membership within God’s true, eschatological covenant people; they will *demonstrate* that membership.” This is where I would disagree with Wright, as the main issue in Galatians, and to a lesser extent Romans, is indeed how you *get in* to God’s people: man-made “works of law” versus trust in Israel’s Messiah and what He has achieved for sinful human beings.

<sup>36</sup> Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul*, 204.

<sup>37</sup> Hegg, *Romans 1-8*, pp 70-71.