

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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Israel's Fall Is Due to Their Disbelief (9:30-33)

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; ³¹but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. ³²Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." ³³As it is written: "See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts (Hebrew aman, Greek pisteuo) in him will never be put to shame [Isaiah 8:14; 28:16]," (Rom 9:30-31).

Here Paul address another question of his diatribe. The question concerns the means of attaining righteousness and acceptance with God. In Paul's reasoning the Gentiles had attained righteousness and acceptance with God where the Jews had alienated themselves from God. The reason was that the Jews sought to achieve their righteousness by lawkeeping, the Gentiles had achieved their righteousness by allowing their lives to be transformed by faith. Paul plays two expressions against one another here: "a righteousness of faith" and "a righteousness of the law" (10:30-31). Then in verse 32, he strikes at the heart of the whole issue. Because they were so obsessed with legalism they gave no place life-transforming faith. Essentially, they had enthroned the *Torah* in their hearts as lord. So when the Messiah came with a message of faith, a force capable of transforming their lives, they saw him and his message as a nonsense; in fact, it was more than nonsense, it was "*skandalon* (offensive); i.e., to the Jews, Jesus' messianic teachings and claims were an affront to the dignity of the *Torah*. The *Torah* demanded obedience to the statutes, judgments, and

commandments; Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of the *Torah* and called for belief in and obedience to him,” rather than the *Torah*. Such was scandalous, an offense of the highest order, and a cause, not of great faith, but of great indignation.

(2) A Zeal for God, Not According to Knowledge (10:1-4)

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ²For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes, (Rom 10:1-4).

The Jews were a people characterized by their passion for righteousness, which they believed could only come through obedience to the *Torah*. Paul knew all too well what it was to have a zeal for God based on misinterpretation and misunderstanding. His zeal had led him to consider Jesus of Nazareth a messianic pretender, which drove him to a personal persecution of those who claimed belief in him. The zeal of the Jews of whom Paul speaks here was also rooted in misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Theirs was a religion of lawkeeping and the daily observance of ritual and moral rules or codes - dos and don'ts. The objective of their religious quest was not to achieve fellowship with God and enter into the wonder of his existence, but to achieve moral perfection and ritual purity and thereby earn a status of righteousness that made them "worthy" of fellowship with God. This kind of "right standing," Paul calls, "a righteousness of their own," (10:3).

(3) The Role of Messianic Faith (10:5-13)

Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them" [Lev. 18:5]. ⁶But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' [Deut. 30:12]," (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷or 'Who will descend into the deep?' [Deut. 30:13], " (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," [Deut. 30:14], that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: ⁹That if

you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. ¹¹As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame" [Isaiah 28:16]. ¹²For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile--the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, ¹³for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" [Joel 2:32], (Rom 10:5-13).

Here Paul reveals the folly of such a pursuit. "Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: The man who does these things will live by them," (10:5). This is the same argument Paul made in the letter to the Galatians, "I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law," (Galatians 5:3). This point is more strongly stated in the letter of James, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it," (James 2:10). The law was given to control human behavior not to transform human existence. According to Paul, only belief has the power to do that; more specifically, belief in the story called "the Gospel." It, according to Paul, possessed the power to save (Rom 1:16).

Paul's language here appears to be drawn from a Hebrew *peshar* of Deut 30:11-14; (*peshar* [to explain] is an argument developed out of a paraphrase of a text of Scripture, which often has no relation to the actual meaning of the text, but contains terms or imagery useful to the point being made). These words were used by Moses to confront the Israelites with the fact that God had revealed his will to them and they were without excuse if they did not follow it.

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. ¹²It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" ¹³Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" ¹⁴No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. ¹⁵See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and

the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess, (Deut 30:11-16).

Paul appears to be using Moses' words to confront his readers with the fact that, like their forefathers, they were without excuse, if they rejected the Messiah God had sent them. Their forefathers had the testimony from Moses for the fact of God's commandments. Here, they had the testimony of inspired men for the fact of God's Messiah.

The language and imagery Paul uses here sound very much like he may be anticipating an argument an apocalyptic Jew would make, whose messianic expectation centered in the drama of the *parousia* (i.e., appearing) of the messianic figures or heavenly redeemers of Jewish Apocalypticism.

The Messiah of Jewish Apocalypticism?

In addition to the Hebrew Scriptures (*Tanakh*) and the oral tradition of the elders (*Mishnah* and *midrashim*), there existed another collection of Jewish writings. There was a body of esoteric writings called, "apocalyptic literature." These writings exist today in two major collections, *The Pseudepigraphal Writings* and *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. The word *pseudo* is Greek for "false," *epigrapha* is a Greek word meaning, "writings or documents."

Within this collection of Pseudepigraphal writings are a number of documents or "books" called "Apocalyptic Writings." Apocalyptic is from the Greek word *apokalupsis*, which means, "revelation or disclosure." The verb *apokalupto* means, "to reveal or make know that which is hidden." To many Jews, these "apocalyptic" writings were believed to be revelations of secret knowledge concerning future events, especially knowledge concerning the coming of God in deliverance of the Jewish people.

Certain of these documents tell of heavenly beings that were to appear on the earth as redeemer figures. The most explicit examples of this messianic figure is in, *The Apocalypse of Enoch* [also called *1 Enoch*], (chapters 46, 48, 87, 91, 92, 108), and *The Apocalypse of Baruch* [also called *2 Baruch*], (chapters 26-30 and 44-51), in which messianic and/or redeemer figures are depicted as appearing on earth to bring redemption to Israel and judgment to the Gentiles. These are all redeemers who appear "out of heaven."

Also, in *The Apocalypse of Ezra* [also called *4 Ezra*], (chapters 7-9), a messianic figure appears on the earth, he dies and is resurrected with the righteous, after which God executes judgment on the wicked. In chapter 13, however, a “Son of Man” figure appears who rises up out of the "heart of the sea" (i.e., also called "the abyss") to execute judgment on the wicked and redeem the righteous.

Conclusion

There is a possibility that, here in these verses (Rom 10:6-7), Paul is using the popular messianic beliefs of Jewish Apocalypticism concerning the origin of the Messiah, in connection with popular Jewish beliefs concerning the origin of the *Torah* to instruct his readers that it is belief in what God has revealed that results in righteousness. The argument of Moses was that the Torah given to Israel was either a means of blessing them or a curse to them; the choice was theirs. Likewise, by analogy, Paul is saying to Israel that the Messiah God had sent them was to be to them, either a blessing or a curse.

Just as the Torah was in their midst, so also was it with the Messiah. He was not necessary that he be brought down "out of heaven" or brought up "out of the sea/abyss," as Jewish Apocalypticism taught would happen when the Messiah did appear? Scholars are convinced that the beliefs of Jewish Apocalypticism, especially those concerning the Messiah were wide spread throughout the Judaism of the first century Mediterranean world. If so, this would provide a significant clue to the interpretation of Paul's words here in this text. As with the Torah, so also with the Messiah; God had revealed both to Israel. Their acceptance of what God had revealed to them would determine whether they were to be blessed or cursed, to use the language of Moses. See David Stern, *Jewish NT Commentary*, p. 400 on this verse.

Paul is also suggesting that the one who achieves the righteousness of faith need not require that the Messiah be brought down from heaven or be brought up out of the Abyss (grave/sea?) to prove or manifest his existence (10:6-7). The true righteous ones (Rom 1:17), are the ones who believe what God has revealed to them. This would be evidenced by belief that Jesus was the Messiah and confess him as Lord:

That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with

your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Everyone believing on him will not be put to shame.' For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile - the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,' (Rom 10:9-13).

Here in these verses Paul inserts the Christological core of his gospel, namely, that God's very power to save them was found in the story Paul had proclaimed throughout the Mediterranean world – the gospel (God's story). The key term in this text is "***Kurios* – Lord,"** which is the name Paul says, in Phil 2: 9-11, is above every name. In this name Jesus Christ reigns over heaven and earth (Matt 28:19), in that he was declared "Lord" by the power of his resurrection and his conquest over the powers of sin and death. His messiahship was one of redemption and lordship; but to have him as a savior one must also accept him as Lord (10:9-10).

God, in the messianic presence of Jesus of Nazareth, didn't come here to improve man's political, economic, and social situation. He came to make us better people, and our world a better world because we are better people. Giving people conquest over their oppressors doesn't make them better people, giving them conquest over the malignant forces of darkness within them, can make them better people; people fit for eternity. People created in the image of God.

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