

# The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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## These Were the People of the Book

“But not all the Israelites accepted the good news,” says Paul; “Lord, who has believed our message?” he quotes from Isaiah 53:1. Israel did not believe “the *basar*,” the good new or glad tidings of God’s herald, the continuing chapters of the God story. Because of this, those who were “his people” had become “not his people,” and those who were “not his people” had become, “his people.” Why and how did this happen? Because, even though they were the people of the book, and God spoke to them through this book, they refused to hear (*akouo*) and heed (*hupakouo*) what God had revealed to them. When they were told, “He’s here,” they said, “No, not so!”

### **They Were the People of the Book**

These people were known throughout the world, at least the Mediterranean world, as “the people of the book.” They had been entrusted with the Oracles of God - they were the very trustees of revelation from God. And it wasn’t that they weren’t interested in what God had to say; rather, the problem was that they didn’t want to hear him say what he said, if it wasn’t to their liking. Their focus was just that, “their focus,” and they saw and heard what they wanted to see and hear. They had willed themselves blind and deaf to what they didn’t want to see or hear.

In Matt 13:14-17, Jesus portrays Israel as a people who were willfully blind and deaf.

*In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: " 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*

*<sup>15</sup>For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' (Isaiah 6:9-10) <sup>16</sup>But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. <sup>17</sup>For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

It is a true saying that there are none so blind as those who will not see and none so deaf as those who will not here. This was the case with most of the Jewish leaders to whom Jesus spoke. The most important and insightful text relating to this issue is found in John 5:37-40, in which Jesus said to the Jews of Jerusalem,

*. . . the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, <sup>38</sup>nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. <sup>39</sup>You search the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, <sup>40</sup>yet you refuse to come to me to have life. (John 5:37-40)*

The word “search” is *ereunao*, meaning, “to search, research, examine, explore.” This word was from the Classical Greek verb, *ereo*, which meant, “to ask or inquire;” or in the middle voice, as it is usually found, *eromai*, which means, “to ask or inquire for oneself.” The word implies a personal quest for knowledge or understanding.

Their search was centered in the Scriptures. The term *graphas*, is the Greek expression for the Hebrew *Tanakh*, meaning the whole collection of the law, the prophets, and the writings. This term is an acronym for the three sets of book making up the Hebrew Scriptures. **TaNakh** is taken from *Tau* (the first letter of the word *Torah* – Law), *Nun* (the first letter of *Nabiim* - Prophets), and *Kaph* (the first letter of *Kethubim* - Writings), each consonant is separated by the vowel point “a,” which produces the word “Tanakh,” the whole of Hebrew Scripture, which became the canonized collection at Jamnia in the 90s, following the destruction of Jerusalem. Their objective in searching the *Tanakh*, according to Jesus, was to find or acquire eternal life. To Jesus’ audience, this would have been the *Olam Ha Ba*, “the age to come” or the messianic age as depicted in Isaiah 60-62. The

Jewish people had a significant level of devotion to the study of Scripture, as may be seen in the following:

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. <sup>2</sup> But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalms 1:1-2)*

*Then I said, "Here I am, I have come- it is written about me in the scroll. <sup>8</sup>I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." <sup>9</sup>I proclaim righteousness in the great assembly; I do not seal my lips, as you know, O LORD (Psalms 40:7-9).*

*Do good to your servant, and I will live; I will obey your word. <sup>18</sup> Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. <sup>19</sup> I am a stranger on earth; do not hide your commands from me. <sup>20</sup>My soul is consumed with longing for your laws*

Reading through Psalms 119, the ardent search for an understanding of the Scriptures is a passion, if not an obsession, with these people. In 119:34, we read, “Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart.” In verses 52 we read, “I remember your ancient laws, O LORD , and I find comfort in them,” and in verse 97, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long,” and in verse 102, “I have not departed from your laws, for you yourself have taught me,” and in verse 174 we read, “I long for your salvation, O LORD , and your law is my delight.”

Paul made a great point of the fact that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God and were the trustees of God’s revealed Scriptures here on earth. “What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision?,” he writes, “Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God,” (Romans 3:1-2). He was one of them, claiming himself to be as ardent as they in his zeal for knowledge of the Scriptures, as he claimed before the Jewish elders in Jerusalem, and as he reaffirmed to the Galatians.

*I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today (Acts 22:3).*

*For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it.<sup>14</sup> And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers (Gal 1:13-14).*

Everything Paul presented to the Jews in his preaching was rooted in the Scriptures, as can be seen in the accounts of his preaching in Acts and in this letters. In Acts 17:2, this is clearly seen, “As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures.” In 24:14, Paul says to the Felix, the governor, in Caesarea, “I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets.” And later to Agrippa he says,

*I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and **Moses** said would happen—<sup>23</sup>that the Christ/Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles." (Acts 26:22-23)*

When Paul came to Rome, in the last years of his life, he called the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome to meet with him. This meeting is very informing with reference to the response Paul received from the Jewish community in Rome, and especially so since this was the destination of the Pauline letter before us.

*They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.<sup>24</sup> Some were convinced by what he said, but others would not believe.<sup>25</sup> They disagreed among themselves and began to leave after Paul had made this final statement: "The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your forefathers when he said through Isaiah the prophet:<sup>26</sup>" 'Go to this people and say, "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving."<sup>27</sup> For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and*

*turn, and I would heal them.’ [Isaiah 6:9-10] <sup>28</sup>"Therefore I want you to know that God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!" [some manuscripts add, 29 After he said this, the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves, (Acts 8:23-29).*

That Paul’s messianic beliefs concerning Jesus of Nazareth were rooted in the Scriptures is repeatedly emphasized in his letters. In 1 Cor 15:3-4 he writes,

*For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, (1 Cor 13:3-4)*

He says in Rom 1:2, that he was an apostle of Christ, set apart for the good new of God, “the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures,” and in 15: 4, he says, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” The Scriptures of which Paul speaks in all these references would have been the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Scriptures, known to every Jew throughout the first century world.

In the early days of the beginnings of Christianity, all the preaching to the Jews concerning the messiahship of Jesus were rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Those who first came to believe him to be the Messiah, came to their beliefs because they became convinced that he was the one spoken of in the Scriptures.

*Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one **Moses** wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph," (John 1:45)*

The Apostle Peter told the Jews in Jerusalem, “For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you,'" (Acts 3:22). This prophet was Jesus of Nazareth. Stephen repeated this claim in Acts 7:37, "This is that Moses who told the Israelites, 'God will send you a prophet like me from your own people' [Deut. 18:15]. When Paul preached to the Jewish synagogue at Berea in Greece, Luke characterizes those Jews as being, “. . . more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message

with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. (Acts 17:11). The Scriptures mentioned here would have most likely been the Greek version of the Hebrew Scriptures, called the Septuagint.

In Acts 18, we are told of a Diaspora Jew from Alexandria in Egypt, by the name of Apollos. Luke says of him, “. . . a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures,” (Acts 18:4). Then in verse 28, Luke says of Apollos, “. . . he vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.”

### **The Messiah Was Revealed in the Book**

The Messiah of Israel’s longing, their hope, their prayers was there in that book, or collection of books, called the *Sepherim*, the scrolls or *Tanakah*. Jesus claims that to see the Messiah, one must look for him there where he was first revealed. When one sees the Messiah as he was revealed in Scripture, he would, then, fully see who Jesus was.

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life, and these are they which testify about me, <sup>40</sup>yet you will not come to me in order that you may have life. (John 5:39-40)*

To the two men on the way to Emmaus, Jesus showed himself to them in the Scriptures,

*He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! <sup>26</sup>Did not the Christ/Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" <sup>27</sup>And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25-27).*

After Jesus disappeared from their sight they responded, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). Jesus opened the Scriptures (the *Tanakh*) to them and they saw him there. Later he met with the twelve and did the same thing for them, "He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about

me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures,” (Luke 24:44-45). Here Jesus refers to the *Tanakh*, the threefold division of the Hebrew Bible: the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms (the first book of the collection called “the Writings”).

In John 2:22, we see the significance of the testimony of Scripture to the identity of Jesus in the minds of his disciples, “After he was raised from the dead,” John writes, “his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.” In John 5:46, he said the Jews questioning him about his identity, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.”

### **But They Would Not Believe (Even Though They Were the People of the Book)**

Recall John 5:37-40; here, as mentioned earlier, perhaps the most illuminating words of the New Testament as to the cause of Israel’s estrangement from God at the time of Paul’s letter to the Roman Christians. Jesus says to the Jews of Jerusalem:

*And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form; <sup>38</sup>nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. <sup>39</sup>You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are they which testify of me, <sup>40</sup>and you will not come to me in order that you may have life (John 5:37-40).*

Even though they were the people of the book, and God spoke to them through this book, they refused to hear (*akouo*) and heed (*hupakouo*) what God had revealed to them. When they were told, “He’s here,” they said, “No, not so!” Just like Satan said to Adam, and Adam through his actions, said to God. Did God say, “you shall surely die?” “No, not so, you shall not surely die; God is wrong!” It’s not the way he says, it’s this way, the way I say, the way I want it to be.

In Jerusalem, just before his crucifixion, Jesus asked the Jews who were questioning his authority to teach the people, "*Have you never read in the Scriptures: " 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone [or cornerstone]; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes'*

[Psalm 118:22,23]? (Matt 21:43). Why didn't these "people of the book" know what he was talking about? The answer is in Jesus' words to the Sadducees (the chief members of the Sanhedrin Council) in Matt 22:29, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." They knew the words of *Torah*, in fact, the scribes called the *Messorettes* counted every letter when they copied the scrolls of the *Tanakh*, but they didn't listen to what God was saying to them through these words. To this same group of "Torah scholars," he says in John 7:19, "Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?" Earlier, in Matt 15:4-9, he had revealed the reason for their seeming inability to see in the Scriptures what he saw.

*Why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition (mesorah – the body of rabbinic teaching)? For God said, 'Honor you father and mother, and anyone who curses father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' he is not to 'honor his father' with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. <sup>7</sup>You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: <sup>8</sup>" 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. <sup>9</sup>They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men,' [Isaiah 29:13].*

These were the *Sopherim*, a guild of scribes after the order of Ezra the Scribe, the ones about whom Jesus says, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat," (Matt 23:2). To these "people of the books" he says, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me (John 5:46). Later, Paul says of these people, "Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts," (2 Cor 3:15).

The view of the writer of the book of Hebrews was that Jesus of Nazareth was superior to Moses, in his identity and words. In 3:3 he writes, "Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself." These Torah scholars would never have accepted this view of Jesus.

The attitude of the Jewish leadership toward Jesus of Nazareth was clearly expressed by Steven in his speech in Acts 7; a speech for which he was killed.

*Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him--<sup>53</sup>you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."<sup>54</sup>When they heard this, they were furious and gnashed their teeth at him (Acts 7:52-54).*

## **Conclusion**

Paul opened this letter to the Romans by stating,

*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God--<sup>2</sup>the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures<sup>3</sup>regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David,<sup>4</sup>and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 1:1-4)*

At the closing of his letter, he reemphasizes the place of the Scriptures as the cord data in his belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, according to the Scriptures. He says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (Rom 15:4). This hope, for him, was in his belief that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the Messiah, sent from God for the salvation of the world. This was his hope, it was the hope of the Jews, and it is our hope.

The question with which we are left is the question with which we began. How could these people who were called "the people of the book," have missed the most critical and essential teaching of the whole of Scripture? How could anyone do that? But we all do.

These people of the book found their teaching concerning worship and ritual in the Law, the Sabbath, the feast days in the *Torah*. They found their teaching concerning praise in the Psalms, and matters of daily life such as circumcision, kosher foods, and marriage and divorce in their book. They found their moral/ethical teaching in that book (the Law, Proverbs, the Prophets). They found esoteric matters there, such as life and death, afterlife, and matters of the soul.

There they found the teaching concerning civil government and the cultus hierarchy, the history of the people, their conflicts and wars; and the many stories of God's deliverance of these people, his providence and care for them in times of blessing and times of crisis – the exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan, the period of the kings and their kingdoms, the apostasy of Israel, and God's punishment of them for their rebellion.

Then there's the teaching concerning the promise of the Messiah, who was to be Israel's savior or deliverer. This was most usually depicted as the coming of God himself, but Israel's scholars tended to take it metaphorically, and identified the deliverer as a human hero figure, a warrior.

But the most obvious and essential revelations from God seem to be the ones they gave least attention to, the revelation of God himself, the creation of man in the image of God, and the relationship implied by that. These were "the people of the book." How could they not know what the book was really about revealing to them?

How can we make an application of all this to ourselves? It should be obvious. We just need to take the name of Israel out and put our names in, and it all tends to look the same. We go our book or *biblos*, to find the same things they did, and we become just as lost in the crowd of ourselves and our concerns, and lose sight of the central figure, the main player, on the stage – the one who gives meaning and significance to it all. Perhaps, it all depends on what you are looking for.

*You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are they that testify of me, <sup>40</sup>and you will not come to me in order that you may have life (John 5:39-40).*

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