

# THE JEWS AND THE LAW

Gerald Bray

## Romans 2:17–3:8

From considering the relative position of the Jews and the Gentiles with respect to the law, Paul now turns to focus his attention on the Jews. Partly, no doubt, this is because he was convinced that the Gospel message was for the Jews first, and in this he was respecting the teaching of Jesus. But it probably also has something to do with the fact that Paul was himself a Jew. He was not afraid to criticize Gentiles when necessary, and we shall see how, later on in this Epistle, he finds fault with some of their attitudes. But Paul understood that the critic must begin with himself, and examine his own sins and failures before venturing to comment on those of others. He knew only too well what it meant to be a Jew, and what most Jews felt about their nationality. So before going any further, he pauses to examine his own people and their psychology. Some people may wonder whether Paul was speaking to any particular person or group in these verses, because of the very personal way in which he writes. It is difficult to answer this question with any degree of certainty, but we ought to remember that Paul frequently used a rhetorical, preaching style to put his message across, and that may be what we are encountering here. In any case, we should certainly not think that just because he is speaking directly to Jews, there is no message intended for us as well!

Paul begins his attack by outlining in great detail what a Jew is and how he understands his own identity. First, a Jew is someone who is identified by a particular label. To an outsider, there seems little reason to boast about coming from a small, fairly barren part of the hill country of Palestine, but to those who called it home, Judaea was holy ground. Not only was it part of the land promised to Abraham and his descendants, but it was the most precious part of that land. It was the home of King David and the centre of the temple worship. When the rest of Israel disappeared into captivity, Judaea was singled out for preservation, so that by the time of the New Testament, it had become synonymous with the nation as a whole. Clearly God had chosen this place, and those who belonged to it, for a special purpose! Jewish Christians could have added, of course, that Jesus was a Jew, and that it was in the heart of Judaea that he was born, that he died and that he rose again from the dead. What more proof could one want that God loved the Jews more than any other nation?

Christians are less tied to geography, but we are just as familiar with the tendency to glorify in labels as the Jews were. We may easily think that there is something divinely appointed in the fact that we may happen to be Catholic or Anglican or Presbyterian or Baptist or Brethren or Orthodox or . . . whatever! We may call ourselves Evangelicals or Charismatics or even Liberals, with a touch or pride which suggests that we know that God loves us more than anybody else, and that we have fallen the right way up as far as he is concerned! Of course, labels are useful in their way, and Paul never suggested that Jews ought to conceal their identity, but to glory in it as if the name could take the place of the substance was clearly wrong, and he did not hesitate to say so!

Secondly, a Jew was someone who took his stand on the law. For him the law was not a crutch which relieved him of the painful necessity of taking decisions on his own. On the contrary, it was an inexhaustible quarry for intellectual speculation and endless disputes over interpretation. The law was important, because it was God's special revelation of himself and of his special purpose for Israel. In possessing it, the Jew had the key to understanding both his own identity and that of God at the same time. He would not have been tempted to confuse the two, of course, but when they were obviously so close to one another, what difference did it make? It was quite safe for a Jew to boast of his acquaintance with God, because he could feel certain that in the end God would come down on his side in any argument. The law taught the Jew what God's will was, and taught him too how to measure the difference between good and evil. Once this was properly learned and absorbed, the Jew could feel that he was properly equipped for his mission in the world.

Christians, with their great missionary and evangelistic tradition, are apt to feel that Jews keep pretty much to themselves. In so far as they have seldom, if ever, engaged in active proselytisation, this is probably an accurate assessment. But a relative lack of interest in winning converts did not mean that the Jews saw no point in their being in the world. On the contrary, they were convinced that God had given them a mission to the less fortunate Gentiles, and Paul proceeds to explain just what that mission was. Incidentally, the language he uses strongly suggests that this mission was self-appointed; the source may

have been the law but the conviction came from private interpretation, not from something God had said in his Word.

First of all, the Jew saw himself as a guide for the blind. This is significant in itself, because it never occurred to him that the blind might one day receive their sight. Guiding the blind is a full-time, permanent occupation, because the condition it seeks to help is also permanent. Thus the relationship between Jew and Gentile was a fixed one which excluded both conversion and equality. Second, the Jew saw himself as a light in the darkness. This sets the personal relationship of Jew and Gentile in the wider context of culture and society. Even if by some miracle a Gentile were to receive his sight, he would still be living in surroundings which would make it practically impossible for him to see anything, unless, of course, he had special access to the light. And that light, as we read in this verse, could only come from the Jews! Third, a Jew saw himself as the tutor of the ignorant and as a teacher of children. To the inbuilt difference between sight and blindness, light and darkness, there is now added an assumed difference of relationship. It is not enough to assist the unfortunate Gentiles; one must do it in as patronising a manner as possible!

The basis for all this, as Paul reminds us in summing up, is the law once again. It is the law which has given the Jew his training in knowledge and truth, two things which were highly prized as essential to right living. The Greeks had puzzled over them for centuries, and devised different schools of philosophical thought in the hope of acquiring the much sought after prize. Later on, many Christians would be tempted to take the same route towards a

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deeper understanding of God, and some even interpreted the New Testament as a puzzle concealing secret spiritual truths which were only available to those with the special key of knowledge which would let them into it. The Jews also had a certain air of exclusiveness about them, and without going to the extent of regarding their knowledge as a secret, certainly reserved to themselves the right and the gift of interpreting it!

There was, however, a serious inconsistency in the Jewish position, which Paul now proceeds to point out. Those who had the law and professed to teach it, did not in fact practise it themselves. The psychology of this attitude is well-known in any system where

the rulers are not accountable to the ruled for their actions. The temptation to bypass the system, if expediency so dictates, is usually too great to be resisted. It is true that the Jews recognized the objective character of their law, at least to the extent of believing that they ought to keep it, but they compensated for their inability to change it by devising a whole series of interpretations which allowed the clever among them to get away with anything they liked. They were thus masters at having the best of both worlds. On the one hand, they could lay down the law for others, but on the other hand they could excuse themselves from it by their complicated interpretations, which only an insider could understand. This kind of behaviour is not exclusive to Jews, of course; it will be found wherever legalistic rigidity is allowed to serve as a model for government. The ultimate justification for the rulers' excuses thus becomes the simple statement of fact, that without them life would be impossible.

Paul sees through all this with great clarity and puts the issue in stark and simple terms. Do the Jews try to teach others? Why then do they not teach themselves? The best commendation for their message would surely be the fact that they practise it in their own lives. To demonstrate what he means, Paul takes three examples, drawn from the Ten Commandments. First, Jews are accused of stealing. This would doubtless have been a common charge against a nation which had turned to trade for a living; it is a popular impression which survives to this day in some quarters. We do not need to fall into crude prejudice though to realise that where there are large sums at stake—or indeed, *any* sum of money—the temptation to steal it will be very great, and not everyone will have the strength of character or of moral principle to resist. In a climate of legalism, the temptation to steal would be even greater, because attention would be drawn to any number of things which would escape the less detailed eye. And as the awareness grows, so the likelihood of sinning also grows, if only because life would be so restrictive otherwise!

The second sin singled out for comment is adultery. This was particularly serious among the Jews because of the great importance they attached to the family link. It is true that polygamy had once been tolerated among them, but even then it was strictly within legal bounds. When King David broke the law and committed adultery with Bath-Sheba, he was made to pay a very heavy price for his deception—and the lesson was recorded at great length in the Old Testament as a reminder of just how serious a sin it was. We see the same thing again in Jesus' dealings with the woman at the well of Samaria (John 4). When her adultery was unmasked, it was as if Jesus had seen into her whole life. The sin was not something casual or secondary, but something which went straight to the heart of her being. Today, when sexual intercourse has become cheap, and in many cases divorced from any sense of responsibility towards the wider issues of life, the deep seriousness of adultery needs to be restated as clearly as possible. It is a sin which perhaps more surely than any other

is capable of destroying the social fabric and the personal stability of our lives.

The third sin is idolatry, closely connected with adultery in the minds of the Jews, partly because many pagan religions were fertility cults in which adultery was officially practised, often with specially appointed 'temple prostitutes', but partly also because of the Old Testament portrayed the Covenant relationship between God and Israel in terms of a marriage bond, and this image was always central to the way in which the Jews understood their own religion. Idolatry was one of the crudest and most indefensible forms of paganism, and the Jews rightly mocked it for its silliness, as much as for anything else. Who in his right mind could possibly believe that a piece of wood or stone had any power over him? Strict monotheism must have seemed like an impenetrable shield, protecting the Jews from any temptation to indulge in such activities.

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That idolatry need not be incompatible with a Jewish type of monotheism is however, demonstrated by Islam, which reveres the sacred stone of Mecca and pretends that it can have some kind of atoning significance for the pilgrim who visits it. Islam is similar to Judaism in many ways, and we must not assume that a similarly concealed idolatry did not lie behind many Jewish ritual practises, especially in the minds of the less sophisticated. Yet even if we exclude that possibility, we find that monotheism opens us to another kind of temptation, the one referred to specifically here. Blasphemy is a term which has little meaning in a polytheistic or pantheistic religion. There will certainly be ritual taboos and the like, but religious misdemeanours are usually less personal than they are in a monotheistic context. The sin is generally thought of in terms of the system or of the overall approach to reality, not in terms of a one-to-one relationship which has been denied or insulted.

In the Jewish context, however, blasphemy could only be interpreted in terms of a personal affront to God. For all the legalism of the system, Judaism remained fundamentally a personal relationship between Israel (originally a single person, Jacob) and the God who had revealed himself to the patriarchs. It is this added personal dimension which made blasphemy especially serious for the Jew, as we can see from the bitter quotation which Paul now repeats. When a Jew sins against his religion, it is not the liturgical practice, but the name of God which is brought into disrepute among the Gentiles (Isaiah 52:5). This is really a form of backhanded compliment to Jews, because it demonstrates the superiority of

their faith over the paganism which surrounded them. But it also makes the condemnation of their activities even more serious, because it is not merely a peripheral activity which is despised by outsiders, but the heart of God's Covenant promise.

It is at this point that Paul moves on to talk about the Covenant which God made with Israel. Up to now, that idea has been present in the background of discussion as a hidden assumption, but now it begins to come out in more specific ways. The mark of the Covenant, borne by every Jewish male who was more than eight days old, was circumcision. This ritual practice is not exclusive to Jews—Muslims practise it as well, for example—but it is characteristic of their national religion, and Paul spoke of the 'circumcision' as a form of shorthand to describe the members of the Israelite community. The Bible does not say why God gave this particular sign to Abraham, rather than any other, but it is not hard to see why it should have been appropriate. For one thing, it was virtually indelible. If a man was circumcised, there was no going back to his previous state, and anyone who might pretend to be a Jew could be quickly discovered. In addition to this basic fact, we might add that it was a constant reminder to the Jews that their Covenant was to be passed on from one generation to the next. Sexual intercourse with a non-Jewish woman thus had the character of religious defilement, and we see this in practise at different points in the Old Testament, especially among the returned exiles in Ezra and Nehemiah.

Circumcision is also a rite which can be administered easily and quickly to a baby, but which is extremely painful when practised on an adult. This may well have discouraged easy conversion, and it certainly

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made converts aware that to join the nation of Israel was to accept suffering and sacrifice as part of one's service to God! Among people used to fertility cults, where the outsized phallus was a recognized symbol of virility, the rite of circumcision would certainly have conveyed a powerful message about just how exclusively different Jews and their religion were. Modern research has sometimes claimed that circumcision is healthier as well, not only for the man but also for the woman. Diseases like cancer of the cervix are practically unknown among Jewish women, and

the practice of male circumcision is often cited as the reason for this. Be that as it may, it is fairly safe to add that the Jews of Paul's time did not realise that—though it would certainly have rejoiced their heart if they had!

But Paul does not dwell on these secondary aspects of circumcision here. For him, its main significance is symbolic, and he cites it in order to repeat his earlier contention that the symbol is not necessarily tied to the reality it is supposed to represent. Christians know this all too well in the case of baptism, which plays a role in the New Testament similar in many ways to that of circumcision in the Old. All the

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theories people have about baptism make very little difference if the new life, which baptism signifies, is not obviously present in the individuals concerned. Furthermore, baptism is not essential to salvation. A person who lives the Christian life will not be excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven because he has not had the right amount of water poured over him in a special ceremony!

But what most Christians take for granted was not so obvious to the Jews, and this is the point which Paul now has to discuss. The circumcised person who does not keep the law by which he was circumcised is really no better than a pagan. For him, circumcision is a meaningless ritual which condemns him rather than assures him of salvation. On the other hand, an uncircumcised person who keeps the law is as good as circumcised, and will certainly not be condemned just because of that! Once again, we have to consider who Paul may be talking about here. His discussion of the subject may be purely theoretical, in which case he may have no particular group in mind. If that is so, however, he takes things rather a long way when he starts to speak of judgement. Perhaps he is thinking of pagans who live by their own lights, though again the context would seem to demand more than this. Most likely he is referring here to the not inconsiderable body of Gentile 'God-fearers' who worshipped alongside the Jews in the synagogue without actually joining the Jewish nation. Some of these would have been fringe people, rather like adherents in many churches today who are not full members, but others would have been just as sincere and devout as any Jew. As we know from the Acts of the Apostles, moreover, it was from among them most of all that Paul's Gospel had its warmest reception.

The concluding verses of the second chapter merely elaborate further on this basic principle, and draw out some of the more important implications for

us. What is so interesting, in them is that Paul does not hesitate to say that true Judaism is a faith-relationship with God, hidden in the heart. We are used to thinking of Christianity in this way, and often we contrast our faith with Judaism on this very basis. Yet Paul is telling us here that Judaism too is basically a heart religion, and that Jews were to blame for their failure to recognize this. The result is that both Judaism and Christianity are put in a new light here. Judaism becomes more spiritual than we are often inclined to think, and Christianity becomes more like it in its fundamental approach to the things of God. As a result, the Old Testament, as the record of this Spiritual Judaism, must be regarded as a book of sacred value to Christians as well as to Jews, and its lessons are meant for us as well as for them!

With that we might easily conclude this section, as did the anonymous scribes who first marked out the chapter divisions in this Epistle. But Paul's thought does not come to such an abrupt shifting point. For him there is still the unanswered question with which his whole discussion of this subject began. That is quite simply what he says at the beginning of chapter 3—what advantage is there in being a Jew? If Gentiles are just as good, if the law is really unnecessary and if a man's chances of doing right in God's eyes might even be greater if he is ignorant of the demands placed on Jews, why bother at all? Are Jews perhaps even to be considered as less fortunate than others?

At this point Paul reacts with a sharp NO. There are many reasons why it is advantageous to be a Jew, and it is important that we understand clearly what they are. First, a Jew is someone who has been entrusted with the Word of God. Notice how carefully Paul phrases this. Many Jews were tempted to take a proprietary attitude to the law, and to refuse admission to the Gentiles. But Paul safeguards God's ownership of his revelation by making it plain that it has been *entrusted* to the Jews for safekeeping. They have not done anything to deserve this, but God has chosen them out of the freedom of his own love for them. The fact that some have turned away does not

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make any difference to this arrangement, because God does not break his promises the way we do. He is true, faithful and just even when every human being on earth turns out to be unfaithful, untrustworthy and an incorrigible liar. This is both the beauty and the tragedy of the Covenant he has made with Israel. God keeps his Word through thick and thin, but man is unfaithful, and brings his own condemnation on himself.

In fact, it is our unfaithfulness and unrighteousness which reveals the faithfulness and righteousness of God. For if God punishes us because we have turned away from him, he is only showing us just how consistent he is with his own revelation of himself. It is all simple, straightforward and logical, though it is still not the whole story. Paul does not deny the consequences of our sin, nor does he do anything but glorify God for the way in which he will deal with it. But he is careful to point out that if we make a one-to-one correspondence between our sin and the revelation of God's glory, we are calculating in human terms, and not in the way that God thinks. This is an extremely important observation to make because, as he goes on to point out, the logical conclusion of that way of thinking would be to encourage people to sin all the more, so that the grace of God would be even more apparent than it already is!

This may seem to be a strange conclusion to come to, but its logic should not be underestimated. People who have a high sense of God's righteousness, combined with a broad understanding of his readiness to forgive, are in fact prone to just this error. They may not go out looking for sins to commit, but neither are they especially bothered about them when they fall into them. Martin Luther, for example, is reported to have told his disciple Philip Melancthon to 'sin boldly' on the understanding that God's power to forgive is unlimited. Luther was no doubt trying to strike a blow for Christian freedom in the light of the legalism of his own time, which was not unlike the kind of Judaism that Paul was

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attacking. But whatever excuses we might be able to make for him, we have to admit that he did not express himself very well. The duty of a Christian is to live a life which reflects God's character as much as possible—not a life which obliges God to reveal his character in ways which might better have been avoided.

God's ways are not our ways, and if we seek to follow him, we need to change our way of thinking so that it becomes something which he can accept as being the mind of Christ at work in us (1 Corinthians 2:16). God's righteousness demands an echoing response from us, without which our faith is dead and our condemnation is assured.

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