

## Notes on Romans 2.1-16

This is a synopsis with minor modifications and additions of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections: New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

### 2. God's impartial judgment leaves no room for moral superiority 2.1-16

The scene is set for final judgment. The judge is impartial; the truth will come out; the world will be made right at last. This typically Jewish depiction of the last great judgment is now transposed into a Christian key: it will take place 'through the Messiah, Jesus' (2.16). What is more, as we will see, God's impartiality means that Jews and Gentiles will be judged alike.

This paragraph, completing Paul's depiction of 'the unveiling of God's wrath' (1.18), appears to be addressed to anyone who, faced with the vices mentioned in Rm 1, tries to adopt a superior posture. There were many pagan moralists in Paul's world, not least in Rome itself, who disdained the behavior Paul condemns just as much as he did and who regarded philosophy as raising them above it. The question, though, of who Paul is really talking to here is complex. This is a problem we shall meet again.

Paul adopts, here and elsewhere, the prose style known as *diatribe*. In the *classical* diatribe— not to be confused with our contemporary meaning of a bitter and abusive speech— the writer debates an imaginary opponent, puts them on the spot, asks rhetorical questions, answers presumed objections. Paul has had plenty of debating experience and knew which arguments might come up, but he doesn't really expect non-Christian pagans or Jews to be reading this letter, so his debate with a fictitious opponent is a show put on for a real audience (the Christians in Rome). The purpose is not to give the Roman church an example of 'apologetics'. Paul wants

them to think the argument through with him, to see why things are as they are. Part of his aim is to show that God's justice upstages the justice of the pagan world, so he uses technical terms known in Stoic philosophy (see at 2.14).

But it turns out, as in Rm 1, that he doesn't have just pagan moralists in mind. He's aiming at Jews as well. This doesn't become explicit until 2.17, but just as the scriptural subtext of Rm 1 pointed to *Israel's* idolatry and immorality while the surface seemed to be talking about the Gentiles, so now repeated emphasis on 'the Jew first and also the Greek' in 2.9-10, and on 'those under the Torah' and 'those outside the Torah' being treated the same in 2.12-15, effectively turns this address to 'whoever you are' (2.1) not just toward a hypothetical pagan moralist, but toward moralizing Jews as well.

So Paul wants his *Christian* audience to overhear a conversation between himself and imaginary *Jewish* interlocutors as if they were *pagan* moralists! This complex scenario is one reason why the text is so dense and difficult. Many-sided writing like this plays a critical part in other parts of Romans as well.

The thrust of 2.1-16 is that God's judgment leaves everyone without excuse. To make this point, Paul sketches one of the fullest descriptions of the final judgment in all early Christian writing. He emphasizes that it is indeed unveiled through the good news; this may come as a surprise to modern readers, for whom 'last judgment' is something that belongs completely to the future, and 'good news' means we're *saved* from it. But for Paul, the 'good news' is the announcement that Jesus, the Messi-

ah, is the one who is to be the judge on the last day.<sup>1</sup> In addition, as the psalmists never tire of repeating, judgment— making things right at last— is indeed good news for those who suffer injustice and oppression.

Long tradition has schooled us to read this part of Romans as showing that all individuals are sinners. That indeed is an element in Paul's argument, but only within the larger theme of the good news that, in Jesus the Messiah, the one God of Jews and Gentiles is finally making the whole world right.

To the surprise of those who expect Paul just to declare here that all are sinners, and that justification may be had by 'faith alone, apart from works of the Torah', he announces on the contrary that at the last judgment justification will be on the basis of works (2.6), and that there will not only be tribulation and wrath for wrongdoers, but glory, honor, immortality, eternal life, and peace for those who seek these things in the appropriate way (2.7,10).

As well as a description of the last judgment itself, Paul offers a classic apocalyptic view of the period leading up to that moment (2.4-5). Again both drawing on and interacting with the book of Wisdom, he describes God as being extremely patient, holding back from summary judgment to give people a chance to repent— but thereby inevitably storing up all the more wrath for the hardhearted, who still refuse to do so.

#### **a. Hypocrisy is inexcusable 2.1**

'Therefore you are without defense, O human, everyone who goes around judging, for in what you judge the other, you condemn yourself; for as you go around judging, you practice the same things'. (2.1).

What's puzzling here is that Paul starts by saying '*therefore* (*dio*)'. Nothing has led us to think the person Paul is addressing is liable to the verdict he's laid out in 1.32. Nothing has indicated that his presumed audience has been calling evil good and good evil. But apparently while guilty of similar offenses, they have been hypocritically condemning 'the other', and their condemnation of 'the other' condemns them. The 'therefore' works, though, if the reader is in fact a Jew and has caught the hints the Paul has laid, for example, in his faint references to Jeremiah and 2Kings in 1.21. Of course, it also works for a pagan moralist who knows that his own heart is not quite pure when, like Nero's teacher Seneca, he doesn't quite live up to what he professes.

#### **b. God's judgment is true, and inescapable 2.2-4**

God's judgment is in accordance with truth, there's no hiding place when he is judge. Rm 2.2 thus reminds that God is implacably opposed to evil, no matter how secret. Paul then repeats and amplifies 2.1: 'Do you think you'll escape?' (2.3).

#### **b. He will judge according to your heart and your works 2.5-6**

Paul's hypothetical (Jewish) sparring partner who presumes to judge others may be adopting a stance outlined in Wisdom and elsewhere:

Wi 12.22 'While therefore you chastise us, you scourge our enemies ten thousand times more'.

That is to say, God is kind and forbearing toward his own people, and does not regard their sins as seriously as those of the pagans.

That would not be Paul's point of view, but actually an abuse of God's forbearance and longsuffering (2.4a). God mercifully allows 'you' (whoever you are) to repent (2.4b; cf Wi 11.23), but with a hard and unrepentant heart, 'you' are only storing up wrath for the day of wrath and of the 'unveiling of God's righteous judgment' (2.5).

About that judgment, Paul wrote at the very start of the body (1.16–15.13) of the letter, 'God's righteousness is being unveiled in [the good news] (1.17). And why is this so? 'Because God's wrath is being unveiled from the sky against all the idolatry and injustice of human beings' (1.18). Now he says, In your hypocrisy, 'you're treasuring up for yourself wrath on the day of wrath and of the unveiling of God's righteous judgment' (2.5). In other words, 'your' hypocritical condemnation of others (whoever you are), already shows what side of God's judgment you're really on, and everything will be unveiled for what it is 'on the day when God shall judge the secrets of men by Jesus the Messiah according to my good news' (2.16).

On that day, God will indeed render to each according to works, and according to what's really in his/her heart (2.6).

In saying this, he's quoting more or less exactly from Ps 62.12 (61.13 LXX; cf Pr 24.12):

Ps 62.12 'You reward every man according to his work'.

In this psalm, judgment according to works is an expression of God's *power and mercy*, in the sense that oppressors finally get what they deserve and the righteous fi-

<sup>1</sup> The tradition goes back to, e.g., Psalms 2; 72; Isa 11.1-10; in Paul's day esp. *Ps. Sol* 17-18.

nally get their reward; therefore, trust in God is mandated. Paul does not deny this deep-rooted Jewish tradition but celebrates it. This might come as a shock to those who expect him to declare that all are sinners, and may be justified only by ‘faith alone, apart from works of the Torah’, and that ‘works’ don’t count. We will have to reserve for later the important question of how *final judgment according to works*, called precisely ‘justification’ in 2.13, relates to the ‘justification by faith’ spoken of in Rm 3 and elsewhere, but the present point is that God’s righteousness, and indeed his wrath, are being unveiled against *all* the idolatry and injustice of human beings, even when they think no one knows what they’re doing, and this is taking place in the good news (1.16-18). God will inspect the secrets of the heart and ‘render to each according to his deeds’ (2.5-6).

### c. The godly and the wicked 2.7-11

Paul now expands what it means that God judges according to works by exploring the contrast between the godly and the wicked. He develops the contrast in a chiasmic<sup>2</sup> sequence: godly, wicked / wicked, godly. The first contrast, in 2.7-8, sketches out the underlying *attitude* of the two classes; the second, in 2.9-10, emphasizes their *judgment* and insists that Jew and Gentile— and it’s becoming clear that Jew and Gentile are *not* the same as the godly and the wicked— will be judged fairly and impartially.

#### 1. Their respective attitudes 2.7-8

Paul does not describe the attitude of the two groups (godly, wicked) in moralistic terms. That is, he doesn’t produce a list of things that will qualify or disqualify for ‘the age to come’, except to say that some people, ‘by patience in well doing, seek glory, honor and immortality’ (2.7). Paul doesn’t say they earn them or grasp them; just that they seek them. On the other hand, ‘Wrath and anger’ come upon others who, ‘out of self-interest’ (*ex eritheias*),<sup>3</sup> do not obey the truth, but obey injustice’ (2.8; *adikia*, again, is not just ‘wickedness’ or ‘evil’ but ‘injustice’). One group is defined by what they seek and the

means by which they seek it; another, by what they obey and don’t obey. We are left to fill in the blanks— if we were to switch the terms, we’d say that the former obey the truth, and the latter do not patiently seek (true) glory. But Paul does not draw up a checklist of things done and not done, weigh them against one another, and arrive at the final verdict. He does not endorse merit-measuring schemes that played a role in some discussions of final judgment, even though they were not at the heart of the covenant. But the first group receives ‘life in the [messianic] age’, and the other, wrath and anger.

Except for the doxology in 1.25 (‘the Creator, who is blessed forever’), this is the first time we’ve seen the word *aiōn* (‘age’) or its cognates. The adjective form, *aiōnios*, is usually translated ‘eternal’, but that’s not quite correct. The expression *zōē aiōnios*, usually translated ‘eternal life’, doesn’t refer so much to everlastingness (though it includes that by the nature of the case), but to the *quality* of the ‘Age’ in question, which will be (or rather, for Paul, has already been) inaugurated by the Messiah. So the godly receive not ‘eternal life’ (though that too) so much as ‘life in the [messianic] Age’ that commences after judgment. Paul’s point is that God’s judgment has already been unveiled in the Messiah, and that the messianic Age has thus begun.

#### 2. Their judgment 2.9-10

Paul has contrasted ‘seeking glory, honor and immortality’ (2.7) with ‘not obeying the truth, but obeying injustice, out of self-interest’ (2.8). Paul now sums up these attitudes in general moral terms— working evil, and working good (2.9-10; cf. 12.9)— and contrasts God’s response to each: tribulation and distress are meted out to the evildoers, and glory and honor and peace (the very things they had sought), to those who do good.

But the emphasis is on the *universality* of the judgment. Condemnation and glory will alike come ‘to the Jew first and also, equally, to the Greek’ (2.9). Their complete equality is implied by Paul’s careful grammar. He solemnly repeats this phrase in 2.9 and 2.10, wrapping up the very point he had made at the beginning in 1.16, of which this double repetition reads as a reminder and a reprise: ‘the good news of the Messiah... is God’s power unto salvation for every one who believes, Jew first, and also to the Greek’, because in it God’s righteousness is revealed to faith, while his wrath is revealed against all human idolatry and injustice (1.17-18).

<sup>2</sup> A *chiasm* is a literary structure which, at its simplest, can be arranged like an X (or *chi*, in Greek):

A B  
B A

Of course, there may be more members, e.g., ABCD DCBA, etc. Such structures are quite common in ancient literature. Whole books such as Mark or 1 John have been analyzed as elaborate chiasms, although not everyone agrees with all analyses. Especially when there is a midpoint (eg ABC D CBA), chiasms are also known as ‘ring structures’ or ‘concentric paragraphs’, etc.

<sup>3</sup> The word *eritheia* is rare, but probably means something like this. Its only attested use before Paul (cf. Ga 5.20; 2Co 12.20; Ph 1.17; 2.3) is Aristotle *Politics* 5.3. See also Jas 3.14, 16.

### 3. God's impartiality 2.11

God's impartiality as judge is not a major theme in Jewish tradition.<sup>4</sup> Of course, when Jews thought reflectively, rather than urgently, on God's justice, impartiality was a vital element in it. But what happens when God's impartiality as cosmic judge conflicts with the covenant promises he made to Israel, to which he has bound himself? How can God's legal justice work together with his covenant justice? The answer will be unveiled in 3.21–4.25. For the moment, like a rich but unresolved musical sequence, Paul's argument makes its striking point, that God has no favorites, and passes on.

#### c. God will judge Jew and Greek alike 2.12-13

You may need to correct your bible, because both NRSV and NIV omit the 'for, because' (*gar*) that links 2.12 to what precedes, and by using this word Paul shows that he intends the whole of 2.12-16 as an explanation of 2.7-11. God will judge Jew and Greek alike, in complete impartiality, *because* both those outside the Torah and those within the Torah will be judged justly. Paul may well be responding to an implicit Jewish interjection: 'We at least have Torah; that sets us apart from the Gentiles'. Here we meet for the first time a crucial point, without which much of Romans remains incomprehensible: 'Those apart from the Torah' means 'Gentiles', and 'those under the Torah' (literally 'in the Torah') means 'Jews'. The 'law' (as most translations have it) here and more or less everywhere in Paul, means 'the Jewish Torah', the Torah given to Moses on Mount Sinai, the Torah that defines and directs Israel, enabling them (supposedly) to be God's people. Gentiles were not 'in the Torah', unless they became proselytes and voluntarily submitted to the Jewish code and became members, of a sort, within Israel.

*Unfortunately, all of this is obscured by treating nomos as 'law' and treating it as a general moral imperative of which the Jewish Torah might be one (undesirable) example, as all translations do. This in fact will be crucial as we read further, because Paul's whole argument is about the place of the Torah, and of the Jews, in God's program.*

The point of 2.12, then, is once more the equal justice with which God will mete out the condemnation. The point is that God will not use the Jewish Torah to condemn Gentile sinners, but will use it to condemn Jewish sinners. Furthermore, mere possession of Torah, hearing

it read in synagogue, will carry no validity with God (2.13). Torah was meant to be obeyed, not just heard.

This is the beginning of a great theme that recurs frequently in Romans: The Torah had become, in much Jewish thought, a badge of *privilege*, a talisman, a sign that Israel was inalienably God's people. No, says Paul. What counts is doing Torah. It will take him eight more chapters to explain finally what he means by 'doing' Torah, and we must follow the argument through to understand him at that point (see on 8.1-4; 10.5-11). For the moment, he's content to assert the point: ethnic privilege, based on possession of the Torah, will be of no avail if Israel has not kept Torah. Justification will be on the basis of performance, not possession.

#### d. Doing the Torah even when not in the Torah 2.14-15

These verses, or part of them, are sometimes considered an aside, letting the main thrust of the paragraph jump from 2.13 straight to the conclusion in 2.16 (so NIV; KJV includes 2.13, too, in the bracket). This once more ignores the word 'for' or 'because' (*gar*) that introduces the passage. Paul intends to explain something he has just said.

Rm 2.14-15 explains 2.12-13 by providing an example of Torah-doers who are not Torah-hearers— people, in other words, who perform what Torah requires even though they have not sat in the synagogue and heard it read, because they are not Jews. Their thoughts may be confused on the last day, but they will show that 'the work of the Torah' had been written on their hearts.

Who are these Gentile Torah-keepers? There are three basic ways in which scholars have taken these passages:

- Some have said, in the light of 3.19-23, that this is a purely hypothetical category. *If* there should be any who succeeded in doing good, they would indeed reap the appropriate reward; but the mirage will disappear when the argument is complete. It will turn out that 'all have sinned, and fall short of God's glory' (3.23).
- Others have taken the opposite line and seen 2.1-16 as evidence that Paul doesn't after all hold that all humans are sinners. In both the Jewish and the pagan world there are some humans who really do what God wants, who avoid vice and practice virtue, and who will be suitably rewarded in the end.

Both of these positions are hard to maintain. The first has Paul leading his readers far further up the garden path than he needs to take them. The second contradicts his emphasis on the universality of human sin, in the

<sup>4</sup> Paul's rare word for 'respect of persons' (*prosōpolēmpsia*) translates the Hebrew idiom of 'receiving someone's face'. In the NT Paul's word occurs only here and in Col 3.25 and Jm 2.1; similar terms in Ac 10.34; Jm 2.9; eg, Sir 35.15[12].

overarching theme stated in 1.18 and concluded in 3.20,23.

- The third way through is that, just as in Rm 1 Paul was hinting at Jews sharing in the judgment that would fall on pagans, a theme waiting to be explored more fully in due course, so here he's hinting at a theme he will explore later in the letter, namely that *Christian* Gentiles (2.14-15)— together with Christian Jews (2.7,10)— will share in Israel's reward.

Throughout the section so far Paul has been saying things that cry out for further explanation, and he will provide it as the letter moves forward. At this point he's sketching out the scene, not filling in the details. But by the end of Rm 2 he has unveiled a little more (see on 2.25-29 below); the picture will be colored in fully in 8.1-11; 10.5-11; and 13.8-10. To anticipate the later argument, he will say that those in the Messiah, who are indwelt by the Spirit, 'do the Torah', even though they may never have heard it. The Torah, in Paul's view, pointed to the fullness of life and obedience to God which comes about *in the Messiah*; those who attain to that fullness of life and obedience are therefore 'doing the Torah' in the sense that really matters. Paul is well aware that this is paradoxical, but to say anything else would be to imply either that the Torah was a bad thing, now happily left behind, or that Gentile Christians are second-class citizens in the Messiah's regime. No, they are not under the Torah, but they are really fulfilling what the Torah wanted.

The main problem with taking 2.14-15 to refer to Gentile Christians is that 'by nature' (*physei*; 'instinctively', NRSV) in 2.14 comes in the middle of the clause— 'for when nations that do not have the Torah by nature do the things of Torah'— and could go with either what precedes or what follows it. If it goes with 'nations that do not have the Torah (by nature)', the point would be he obvious: Gentiles do not, by nature— i.e., by origin and parentage— possess the Torah. This is exactly the sense that Paul gives to the expression thirteen verses later when, making an almost identical point, he describes Gentile Christians as 'the by nature uncircumcision that fulfills the Torah'. 'Nature' cannot here refer to something that is innate to all human beings; Jews, too, are born uncircumcised; that is, in that sense, their 'natural' state, but 'by nature' refers to Gentile humanity as opposed to Jewish (cf. Ga 2.15). So also here. The weakness of this theory is that if Paul did mean this, he might more naturally have put *physei* between *ta* and *mē*, but hypothetical reconstructions of what an author 'might' or 'should' have said are, of course, insecure, and *nomos always means 'Torah' in Paul, not a general moral 'law'*.

To have the work of the Torah 'written on the heart' (2.15) is one of the promises of the new covenant in Jr 31.33 (see also Jr 32.40; cf. the 'new heart' in Ez 36.26). This 'written on the heart' is a further indication that Paul has Christian Gentiles in mind. Their conscience bears witness to this (2.15). Nothing here, or in Paul's other references to 'conscience', implies that he accords this faculty the status of offering direct unveiling of moral truth, and indeed in 1Co 8, he mentions persons who have 'weak' consciences and need to be treated accordingly. But here the thought is just that Gentile Christians, living in the Spirit, are in fact fulfilling the Torah, are aware deep within their own hearts of the promised renewal.

Why then do their thoughts become confused— 'accusing or else excusing one another' (2.15)? Perhaps because being outside the Torah and yet fulfilling it from the heart, leaves them with questions that may produce a moment of panic in even the most settled believer. Perhaps because, as Paul has said in 2.7, they have not *earned* glory, honor, and immortality, just sought it; they know it's a gift and, as the hymn writer puts it, 'they who fain would serve thee best are conscious most of wrong within'.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps because there are times of 'fightings without and fear within' (2Co 7.5), and of utter despair (2Co 1.8). Paul is clear, though, about the outcome.

**e. The day of judgment:  
according to the good news,  
and through Messiah Jesus 2.16**

The climactic statement at the end of the argument, picks up the scriptural theme of 'the day of Yhwh'— God will judge the secrets of human hearts. Nothing will escape scrutiny. God will be manifest as impartial and just. And this judgment, as we have already noted, will be 'through the Messiah, Jesus'. God's justice will be unveiled, fulfilling scriptural promises and putting all other justice (Caesar's included) to shame. Why so? Not least precisely because this unveiling will expose and assess the secrets of men. No human— Jew or Gentile— can hide from judgment by relying on appearances and covering up the heart.

Paul clearly believed that morals mattered to society and to persons and was not frightened to state what those morals were and how disregarding them brought disaster. Of course, he set all this in a different context from that of either Judaism or the pagan moralists (and from that of contemporary secular or postmodern moralists, for that matter), but he did not object to people holding high moral standards. He did object to failing to practice what one preached.

<sup>5</sup> H. Twells, 'At even, ere the sun was set'.

Belief in a final just judgment remains excellent news for billions in our world, as it was in Paul's. Of course, when this belief is turned into vague hopes for a better hereafter and shrill hellfire denunciations and casual self-satisfied salvation-assurance, not only is the Christian view of God's just judgment lost, but with it the true hope of the oppressed as well. As Marx pointed out, oppressors are skilled at using hopes of heaven and threats of hell to keep their subjects from rebelling. But that's a parody of Paul's teaching. There's indeed a promise that wrongs will be made right, offering a strong and sure hope that can sustain those who suffer oppression and injustice. And in Jesus the Messiah, this hope has come into the present. Those who give allegiance to Jesus, far from passively submitting to oppression by trusting in vague future hopes, are charged with realizing God's justice in the present time in all ways possible.

But the creator of the world does not play favorites. No one— culture, nation, ethnic group, church— can say 'because we are x, y, or z, God will be gracious to us come what may'. In a world of increasing ethnic and tribal tensions, often exacerbated by different religious affiliations, we need to hear this anew.

Paul seems to take it for granted that Christians will not be in the position of his imaginary interlocutor; but we are sadly familiar with those who preach allegiance to Jesus as Lord but do not practice it. To name the name of Jesus, though, is to invoke the one to whom all will give account, as 2.16 makes clear.

### **3. Jews were to be the light of the world, but failed 2.17-29**

We now arrive at the point to which the whole section has been building up. Israel, resting on God's special vocation, has not fulfilled that vocation, and must face the challenge from those who, though not ethnically Jewish, are now inheriting Israel's role in God's purposes.

In addressing 'the Jew' Paul was, of course, talking to his own former self. Moreover, as 9.1-5 will make clear, he felt deep personal grief as he saw his 'flesh'— i.e., his kinfolk— in rebellion against the good news of their Messiah, Jesus. We have to see what now follows in this light.

As we read, we should beware of the tendency, within our individualistic culture, to assume that when Paul uses the second-person singular ('If *you*, singular, call yourself a Jew') he's addressing the *reader* as an *individual*. Just as in Rm 7 his rhetorical use of 'I' indicates the nation as a whole, so here 'you' focuses and makes dramatic what he says about the whole Jewish people. Paul is not for a moment suggesting anything so absurd as that all Jews

steal, commit adultery, rob temples, and so forth. His point is rather that the national boast of ethnic Israel, that of being the creator's chosen people, is falsified if theft, adultery, and so forth are found within the nation. He is also hooking in, at various places, to the prophets' own criticisms of Israel. Israel's misbehavior renders its ethnic boast void, not least because prevents Israel from fulfilling its calling to be the light of the world.

The passage, then, is not just part of a long demonstration that all humans are sinful. That is indeed one of the major thrusts of the section 1.18–3.20, but within that overarching purpose these verses introduce a quite different idea. Faced with a general denunciation of the pagan world, many educated Jews— including, presumably, Paul himself in his pre-Christian life— would say that this is of course true of pagans, but that God has chosen Israel as the light to the nations and has given Israel the Torah so that it can fulfill this role. Israel is the solution to the world's plight (see, among countless possible examples, *2Bar* 48.20-24). The issue that Paul is now going to outline— to which he will offer a solution in the section beginning at 3.21, is not just that all are sinful and in need of salvation, but that the bearers of the solution have become part of the problem. Israel, called to be the light of the world, has become part of the darkness. How then can God's covenant plan be fulfilled? The problem of Israel is thus also a problem for God. It's, in fact, a further dimension of the problem of God's righteousness. Only if we appreciate this will the transition from Rm 2 to Rm 3 make any sense.

The prophecy of Amos denounces, in deliberate order, the nations surrounding Israel before zeroing in on Judah (Amos 2.4) and particularly the northern kingdom, Israel (Amos 2.6). Paul's turn to 'the Jew' in 2.17 has some analogies with Amos's rhetorical ploy.

But as we have seen, Paul has had Israel in mind all along, hinting darkly in 1.21 (for example) that his fellow Jews were as guilty of idolatry as were the pagans, and strongly suggesting in 2.1-16 that their would-be superiority was no better than that of the pagan moralists. But his point now is not so much to bring out into the open a charge that they are sinful like the rest. He will rub that in in the middle of Rm 3 (and say it again, from another angle, in 7.7-25). The point here is not what Israel has been doing, so much as what it *should* have been doing— and was called to be— the divine answer to the world's problem. Instead, Israel is itself fatally compromised with the very problem that afflicted everyone else. Israel's sinfulness is at the heart of the charge, but the charge itself is that the doctor, instead of healing the sick, has become infected with the disease. How can a

nation that so manifestly fails to be the light of the world, as the prophets show, claim to be keeping Torah?

In the second paragraph of this section (2.25-29), Paul advances a stronger and more detailed form of the argument he made in 2.13-15. Supposing, he says, there exists a people, not sharing Israel's ethnic privileges, in whom the purposes of God as expressed in Torah are coming to fulfillment. Will they not thereby upstage ethnic Israel? Yes, he declares, such people are members of the renewed covenant. They will show what being a 'Jew' is all about.

Thus, just as Paul built into his exposition of human sin (1.18-32) elements that hinted at what was to come, so now, in the same way, he's building in to his statement of the complex problem of sin— of human sin and of Israel's failure to be the solution-bearer— hints of the solution. We can fully understand 2.26-29, dense and proleptic as it is, only with help from elsewhere; but when we grasp it, we will see why Paul has included it here. Non-ethnic 'Jews' and an uncircumcised 'circumcision' are a direct, if oxymoronic, challenge to Israel, and if God has called this parallel company of 'Jews' into existence, what was even the point of Israel in the first place? What is God up to?

**a. If you are a Jew and  
boast in the Torah 2.17-20**

Paul introduces his discussion of the Jews with a challenge: God will judge everyone impartially, but you— you claim the name 'Jew', and you claim to 'rely on the Torah', you 'boast in God', and you say you are the 'light of the world'....

The first two of these need more nuance. The word translated 'rely' principally means 'rest on'; it's a matter of finding security and comfort, not a matter of using the Torah as a ladder of good works, up which to climb to a position of moral superiority or a self-earned salvation. The attitude Paul describes would say: 'God gave Israel the Torah; our possession of it's the rock on which we stand; it's what makes us Jews God's special people'.

The attitude to God is much the same. The Jew claims to be able to 'boast in God'; the point is that the creator of the world is Israel's God, and is ready to back Israel up.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary English the word 'boast' (*kauchasai*) is almost always negative, whereas for Paul it can be positive (eg, 5.11). 'Celebrate' would bring out the point: the

<sup>6</sup> NIV has 'brag about your relationship to God', as if the 'Jew' were telling people about a marvelous personal friendship with the true God; this is not Paul's meaning. NRSV has 'boast of your relation to God', which still sounds like a 'personal relationship' in the sense of two persons engaged in active friendship. The word 'relationship' is responsible for many fudged arguments in contemporary theology.

Jew celebrates the fact of election, of being God's chosen people. Paul does not regard these claims with contempt or try to undermine them. The Torah really was given to mark Israel out as God's people. God really was 'their God'. Paul doesn't for a moment reject the specialness of Israel. But have those making the claim forfeited the right to do so?

This basic picture is filled out with more of 'the Jew's' self-description. Rm 2.18 states two ways that the Torah enables the Jew to attain true moral knowledge, as a result of which (2.19-20) Israel should be in a position to instruct the nations. This prepares the way for the charge in 2.21-24, which consists of four moral challenges and a question about Torah, backed up with a quote from the prophets.

In 2.17-24, Paul is concentrating on Torah, in 2.25-29 on circumcision; these are the badges that marked out Jews from their pagan neighbors.

Possession of Torah enables 'the Jew' to know God's will and 'distinguish things that differ' (2.18), in other words, to make moral judgments and the kinds of distinctions known in Judaism as *halakhah* ('path')— permitted, not permitted, etc. Another translation might be 'determining what is best' (NRSV). The Torah enables the Jew to see to the heart of moral issues. As a result (2.19-20), Israel should be the light of the nations, the world's moral teacher, because in Torah Israel really does possess 'the form of knowledge and truth'. 'Form' (*morphōsis*, perhaps also translated 'embodiment') means 'outward manifestation'. Paul is acknowledging, and endorsing, a remarkably high, almost incarnational, view of Torah, which should be kept in mind during subsequent discussions.

**b. What have you done  
with these privileges? 2.21-22**

Granted your possession of the lofty privilege of Torah, Paul enquires, what have you done with it? Remembering that the 'you' in question is not 'every Jewish individual', but 'Israel as a whole', the answer must be: Israel has squandered its inheritance. Like the biblical prophets he will presently quote, Paul charges Israel with faithlessness (see also Ps 50.16-20 and the other passages quoted in 3.10-18). The first question serves as a heading for the others: Teacher of others, will you not teach yourself? Theft and adultery exist in Israel, both literally in many cases and spiritually wherever people 'rob God' (Mal 3.8) or are unfaithful to him, as a bride to her husband (e.g., Hos 2.2-13).

The charge of temple robbery is, at first blush, more surprising. It seems unlikely that many Jews robbed temples. Paul's word (*hierosyleis*) can simply mean 'commit

sacrilege', and Paul's point is that sacrilege is unlikely to demonstrate a better way to be human. But actual temple-robbing, though surely not widespread, was not unknown either. Some Jews evidently argued that, since idols have no real existence, things given to them are nobody's property, and hence may be taken with impunity.<sup>7</sup> The practice exists and brings discredit on Israel precisely among those to whom 'the Jew' is supposed to be the light of the world. Paul's concern is with Israel as a whole, rather than every individual within it, and his point about Israel as a whole is not just that the Jews have sinned, important though that is, but that this sin results in the failure of Israel to be God's light to the Gentile world.

**d. Have you not dishonored God? 2.23-24**

This opens up the substance of the charge. Breaking Torah nullifies boasting in Torah. What Israel has done with the Torah has brought dishonor upon God: The pagan nations scorn the true God because of how the covenant people have behaved.

Israel, in fact, is in the state spoken of by Isaiah in 52.5. Israel went into exile because the pagan behavior of Yhwh's own people brought his wrath upon them, because the pagan nations, looking at Israel, now blaspheme him. The same theme appears in other prophetic passages, notably Ez 36.20-23, a passage that (as we shall see) Paul almost certainly has in mind as well.

As usual, Paul evokes with a single quotation a whole world of scriptural resonance. His point throughout the paragraph is something that few Jews in his day would have contested: that Israel as a whole is not living up to what Yhwh would desire and that Israel's continued subservience to the pagan nations, which had begun with the Babylonian captivity, was a sign that the great promised redemption had not yet arrived. In other words, Israel's 'exile' was still continuing, not in a geographical, but in a theological, spiritual, and moral sense. The prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and others had not yet been fulfilled. As the book of Daniel had emphasized, the seventy years of exile had become seventy weeks of years. At the very point to which Paul draws attention, in both Isaiah and Ezekiel, where Yhwh declares that the very name of God is dishonored among the nations and

so it's time to act, Isaiah goes on at once to speak of the herald who announces good news to Zion (52.7, quoted by Paul in 10.15); Ezekiel goes on at once to speak of covenant renewal, involving a change of heart and the gift of a new spirit through which God's people will at last keep the statutes of the Torah.

**e. Circumcision of the heart 2.25-29**

Israel has failed, but covenant renewal is at hand. Paul comes at this latter point by introducing, in parallel with the point about Torah, the question of circumcision. This was not, as many Christians suppose, a quasi-moral 'work', or a 'ritual' designed to earn God's favor, but a key sign of Jewish identity, marking out the Jew from the pagan. Paul points out in 2.25-29 that circumcision means what it's supposed to mean only where Torah is kept; but Torah has been and is being broken repeatedly in Israel's life. On the other hand, if the prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah about covenant renewal seem to be coming true so that people with new hearts, new spirits, are keeping the ordinances of Torah, even though they're not Jews— then, whether they're circumcised or not, they show their very existence the brokenness, the invalidity, of the covenant membership of those who cling to circumcision and break the Torah.

The main points to grasp in 2.25-29 are that Paul's description of a parallel 'Jewishness', a new sort of 'circumcision', is replete with overtones of 'new covenant' passages both in scripture and elsewhere in his writings, and that the covenant renewal that's taking place in the Messiah has brought the Gentiles into God's people. The problems that this causes, for Paul and for contemporary readers, will emerge later in the letter, together with the solutions Paul proposes (see at 3.27-31; 8.1-11; 10.1-13).

**1. Circumcision can be a sign of exclusion 2.25**

The initial statement, out of which the rest emerges, is sharp: 'Circumcision is an advantage [*ōphēlei*; this will come up again in 3.1] if you do Torah, but if you're a transgressor (*parabatēs*) of the Torah, your circumcision has become uncircumcision' (2.25). Actually doing Torah is the main thing; without it, circumcision doesn't just become a meaningless talisman, *circumcision itself* actually places one *outside* God's people! (cf 1Co 7.19). It becomes a badge of *exclusion* rather than of inclusion (cf. Ga 5.2-6, albeit with reference to ex-pagans). Paul will have more to say on this topic (which was, of course, central in the Galatian controversy) in Rm 4.

**2. Covenant renewal 2.26-27**

Paul now explicitly introduces a category of people that is central to his thought and that will occupy him for

<sup>7</sup> Dt 7.25-26 and Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 4.287 show that the temptation existed; Josephus *Against Apion* 1.310.11 reports a pagan slander against Jews that the name Jerusalem was a pun on the word for 'temple robbery' because the Jews who settled it had done so much of it; Acts 19.37 shows that the charge was likely to be levied against Jews in the pagan world. For rabbinic material, see H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar Zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrash*, 6 vols. (Munich: C.H. Beck'sche, 1922-61) 3.113-15.



much of the letter. These are uncircumcised people who, 'keep the decrees of Torah (*ta dikaiōmata tou nomou phylasēi*)'. He's summoning several OT passages with this phrase:

Ez 36.27 I will put my Spirit within you, and make you walk in my statutes (*dikaiōmasin*), and you will keep (*phylasēthe*) my ordinances, and do them.

Dt 30.16 ...I command you this day to love Yhwh your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commandments (*phylasesthai ta dikaiōmata*) and his statutes and his ordinances, that you may live and multiply, and that Yahweh your God may bless you in the land where you go in to possess it.

Lev 18.5 You shall therefore keep (*phylaxesthe*) my statutes (*prostagmata*) and my judgments (*krimata*); which a man shall do them, and live in them: I am Yahweh.

And there are others as well. These passages recur in 10.5-11, which develops the present thought; see at 10.1-21.

The uncircumcision of these people will count as circumcision— the fact that they are *not* Jews will actually count them as God's people; in other words, God will recognize their uncircumcision, paradoxically, as the sign of their membership in Israel. Scandalous!

The verb here is *teleiōō*, 'fulfill', cognate with *telos*, 'end' or 'goal'. It does not mean 'keep' (NRSV) or 'obey' (NIV), and those translations miss an important echo in 10.4: 'the Messiah is the goal/fulfillment (*telos*) of the Torah for all who believe'.

And as though saying that uncircumcision is the sign of membership in Israel were not scandalous enough, Paul goes on to state that these Torah-keeping though 'naturally'<sup>8</sup> uncircumcised through their Gentile origins, will actually judge those self-appointed judges (2.1,3) who, despite having the 'letter of the Torah and circumcision', are actually Torah transgressors (2.27).

By referring to the Torah as 'the letter' Paul has carefully introduced the category that will enable him to contrast two types of covenant membership in the climactic verses that now follow.

<sup>8</sup> To refer to uncircumcision, as NIV and NRSV do, as 'physical' is misleading. By 'naturally' Paul means, as we saw in reference to 2.14, 'as Gentiles'. All males are 'naturally uncircumcised' in the sense that they are born that way.

### 3. Who is the real 'Jew'? 2.28-29

Paul's explanation (*gar*, 'for, because')<sup>9</sup> is also a conclusion. The section begins with 'the Jew' who claims that name, and calls Torah and God to witness it, but fails to fulfill the Torah. Paul now transfers the name, and the validation, to a different group— uncircumcised Gentiles who do fulfill the Torah.

This has been puzzling because, in context, he can only mean Gentiles, but Gentiles don't worship Israel's one God, keep kosher, etc. So what can he possibly mean by 'fulfill the Torah' in 2.27?

This passage, explaining what has gone before, is about membership in the new, or renewed, covenant, and he has just said that the uncircumcision is a sign of belonging to God's people. Which uncircumcision? Those who have heard the good news of the messiah and come to faith in the Messiah. But the category is not restricted to Gentiles; Paul explains the narrower point (2.26-27) by setting out a broader one. He most certainly regarded himself, and his fellow Jewish Christians, as part of the same new covenant people of God.

He contrasts that which is open, visible, and obvious, with that which is secret. This boils down, more or less, to an 'outward/inward' distinction, as NRSV, NIV; and most others translate, but we should beware of importing into Paul a Platonic either/or that is foreign to him. His sentences are clipped and dense, and paraphrase is almost inevitable here; literally, what he says is, 'For the one in what is manifest is not a Jew, nor is the one in what is manifest in the flesh circumcision; but the one in secret is a Jew, and circumcision is of the heart, in the spirit not the letter' (2.28). Given the structure of the previous paragraph (Torah; circumcision), the first 'manifest' here would be Torah, since the second is circumcision. But Paul *doesn't* say, as some translations do, the 'true' Jew, the 'true' circumcision. His point is quite stark. The name 'Jew', and the attribute 'circumcision', belong to the secret/heart/spirit people, not to the manifest/flesh/letter people (cf. Ph 3.3, where a closely accurate translation might be 'the 'circumcision' means us'). To an ethnic Jew, this would be absolutely indigestible! But to emphasize that he really means it, Paul at once challenges himself on the point and to think through what follows.

In referring to the secret/heart/spirit people, Paul clearly means those in whom the good news of the Messiah has done its work. The promises of God through Dt 30, Ez 36, and elsewhere (quoted above), have come true. As he had promised, God has accomplished, in Jesus and the

<sup>9</sup> This important word is omitted by NIV.

Spirit, a covenant renewal, whose result has been the re-creation of Israel. Paul's clearest statement of this point may be found in 2Co 3.1-6, where the letter/spirit contrast is again prominent. There are several other passages in which a similar theological understanding may be discerned, not least Rm 8 and 10. Paul's covenant theology is precisely about the radically new and unexpected, even shocking, way in which God has fulfilled his covenant-renewal promises. In fact, 'covenant' and 'apocalyptic', so far from being antithetical categories, actually belong closely together in Second Temple Judaism and in Paul himself.

The paragraph carries a typically Pauline sting in the tail. This new covenant people who fulfill Torah whether or not they are circumcised, who carry the covenant mark on their hearts rather than in their flesh— this people shows that it has the right to be called 'Jews' because 'their praise is not from humans, but from God' (2.29). An educated Jew would recognize that the Hebrew word 'Judah' means 'praise'. They receive 'praise', that is, the name 'Judah', from God, as a gift of grace. These are the ones who can now 'celebrate in God' (2.17), as he will declare in 5.11.

Paul has introduced this brief description of the new covenant people into his argument without full explanation. Within 2.17-29, its primary purpose is just to highlight Israel's failure to be the creator God's covenant people, the light of the world. But he has also introduced one of the major themes of the letter, which he will elaborate in due course. In fact, 2.26-29 stands to 3.1-8 much as 5-8 stands to 9-11. Paul's thought in this letter moves in a great expanding upward spiral; when we reach Rm 8, we shall be able to look down from a greater height and see this dense little statement more or less exactly beneath us.

Like many things in Rm 2, this passage awaits elaboration. In addition to the questions Paul asks at once at the start of Rm 3, readers ancient and modern have wanted to know: In what sense do these people 'fulfill the Torah', or 'keep the ordinances of the Torah'? We often need patience when reading Paul, which, after all, is one of the fruits of the Spirit.