

Questions about the Torah and the book of Romans

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These questions were posed by two very good friends and Bible Scholars who have been reading the commentary on the Book of Romans. I have seen this as an opportunity to put my answers on the Web Page so that others can get the benefit.

Question 1: What is a Covenant?

It is a contract! In the ancient world a king or a ruler would make "an offer that can not be refused" to his subjects. There were two kinds of such covenants -- two sided and one sided covenants. The one sided covenant was much stronger because normally it would be given by the king or ruler to a worthy citizen who has earned the favor of the ruler. Such a covenant if it was not limited by time would be valid until one of the parties dies or is deposed.

Each covenant had three elements: a) The agreement. b) The document or book that recorded the agreement and its terms. c) The sign or monument of the covenant which would serve as a witness and reminder of the covenant. There were times when the covenant also had a covenant meal or celebration that would commemorate each year the date and terms of the covenant.

(I know that you both know these things, but it is best to give a full answer that later I can use for others that ask the same question).

Question 2: In the New Covenant, what are the terms of the covenant?

Is a valid question because as Messiahians we have not been educated to look at the Work of Yeshua as a covenant -- we have masked it in every way even by calling it a "Testament" which normally would mean a dead-man's last wish. So, what are the terms of the New Covenant? I think that we need to go back to Jeremiah 31 to see what God promised when he foretold us that he will make a New Covenant. The way I understand the terms of the covenant is as follows. In the Sinai covenant the terms were -- 'Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' (Exodus 19:5-6) The New Covenant that God promised to Jeremiah says: "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34" No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (Jer. 31:33-34) Note the similarities between these two statements of God. Often times we note the differences but forget to look at the common points in God's promises in both cases. Here are a few of these similarities:

God is the covenant giver in both cases.

Both covenants have to do with God's Torah (law) – the New Covenant is not a covenant that releases one from keeping God's Torah (law) – only the material that it is written upon is different. In Sinai it was written on stone and in Jeremiah it is written on our hearts. In both cases God said, "my Torah (law)" – not free from Torah. How many Torahs (laws) does God have? What does God want from humanity now? What did God want from Humanity before he gave the two tables of stone to Moses on Mt. Sinai? What did God want from Adam and Eve in the Garden, what did He want from the generation of Noah? I think that these are the terms that we need to look at and get free from the traditional Protestant attitude that is negative toward God's will which is the Torah that we got used to calling it "The Law." The results of giving the New Covenant have to be according to Jeremiah, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. 34" No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord." But, these are the same results that God expected when He gave the Torah in Sinai – He did not get these results from Israel as a nation. Plan "A" did not work well, but God had plan "B" – that was already predicted and foretold in the scheme of things inside plan "A." It would be as if you just purchased a new car – and immediately started a new savings account and started to put your change in this account for the next new car. This would indicate that you know that the new car that you just purchased will need a replacement after it runs its course in time. This is what the writer of the book of Hebrews says in chapter 8.

Question 3: If man has always been saved by grace through faith, what is the benefit of Messiah?

This is also a question of prime importance – and in my opinion Paul's opponents were asking the same question in the first century. This is what Paul was answering in Romans chapter 3 and 4 – the real issue is the righteousness of God as it was revealed in the Messiah's work and faith. Now to the answer of your question; Paul said: "When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. 21 What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! 22 But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Messiah Yeshua our Lord." (Romans 9:20-23)

The problem was not with the Torah, as Paul stated in Romans 7, the problem was with our choices to follow the rebelliousness of our hearts. What I understand of this is the following. Before the advent of the Messiah the Grace of God was available to men in the framework of Israel's commonwealth – but the divine tools (the Holy Spirit) to make this grace work in the life of Israel was not available. (Why did not give the Holy Spirit from the beginning to Abraham and all of Israel? The answer to this is that God did not want to be a respecter of persons. He has made his choice of Abraham and his seed to save the whole world and He had to show the disobedience of all flesh before he could pour out His Spirit on All flesh. If God would have done it directly with Israel both Israel and the nations would have lost their free will to chose, and thereby lost the whole aspect of Love. One needs the Holy Spirit to change the pattern of life and behavior in order to make God's grace a permanent change in our lives. The Torah of God has to be written in our hearts – our hearts have to be circumcised and we have to be filled with God's spirit that will make it possible for us to live the changed life.

Question 4: Is Paul dealing with a heresy in Romans that says one could be saved by keeping the Torah, or is he simply expressing a change that took place at the coming of Messiah. i.e. - one could be saved by keeping Torah, but now that Messiah has come, one is no longer saved by keeping Torah, but by faith in Messiah?

Judaism has always affirmed that “salvation” is by the grace of God. No one is worthy of God or of a relationship with Him by his own worth. Even Moses was not worthy of God’s calling. He had to “pay” for his sin. King David was not worthy of God’s calling – He had to pay for his sin, he had to repent, he begged God for His mercy. There were in the first century groups of Jews (not main stream Pharisees) who had a warped view of the Torah and who believed (like the Egyptians) that good deeds are measured and bad deeds are measured and whichever of these is heavier on the scales wins. But, this view was not and is not the main view of Judaism. Paul’s opponents, in my opinion were not Jews – they were converts to Judaism, they did not know the Torah and had no intention to keep the Torah. Paul states it in Galatians: “For **not even** those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Yeshua Messiah, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For in Messiah Yeshua neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but a new creation.” A key to understand the issue of circumcision in the New Testament is to know that the now “circumcised” in Paul’s writings do not refer to born Jews, but to those who have chosen to be circumcised. A born Jew does not choose to be circumcised – no one asks him when he is eight days old if he wants to be or does not want to be circumcised. Paul’s statement in Galatians 6:14, “but God forbid that I should boast” is a reference that he was a born Jew, well educated in Judaism, and a Pharisee – as he stated in Philippians 3:5. Although the agent of salvation is not the keeping of the Torah, but God’s grace, and although it was always so, the keeping of the Torah for Israel was a measure of their faithfulness and the means of living in the blessing of God here on Earth. (See the blessings and the curses in Leviticus 25, Deut. 27-28.) The agency of eternal salvation was from the days of Abraham, through Moses, David, etc... a relationship with the Creator, the God of Israel. We call that relationship in the New Covenant, “faith.”

Now there is a difference in the “means” and in the “calling” Between Jews (Israel) and non-Jews (the Gentiles). The difference is not in the worth or value, nor is it a difference in God’s grace, nor is it a difference in God’s means of salvation, it is a difference in the mission or “calling” that God has in history of different people. The role of Israel in history is different from that of the Gentiles – this is a Biblical and an historical fact – and that of course is the “advantage” and at the same times the “disadvantage” of the Jews. The Gentiles were never “under the Law” and therefore, never had to keep the Torah – and still do not have to keep the Torah of Moses as a Covenant. It was not given to them, and they did not promise to keep it like Israel did, and they were not punished for not keeping it, as Israel was punished. The Gentiles were sealed in “disobedience” in the fall of the tower of Babel. This “sealing” was opened by the work of Yeshua on the Cross – now in Messiah those who were far can come near not by the works of the law, but by the faith of Yeshua the Messiah. The Jews on the other hand, made a covenant with God in Sinai. In that covenant they gave a promise to God, they took an oath. Deuteronomy states: “If you do not carefully observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, THE LORD YOUR GOD, 59”then the Lord will bring upon you and your descendants extraordinary plagues—great and prolonged plagues—and serious and prolonged sicknesses. There are also in the Torah commandments that are given to Israel (only) that are called, “eternal” – “for all your generations” – “as long as the world

exists." I believe that as a Jew the Torah is my "national" identity – my personal heritage. I do not believe that I must keep the Torah in order to be justified by God on the day of Judgment. I do not believe that the books that we are going to be judged by is going to be the book of commandments. The book that we are going to be judged by is the book of life – it existed before the Torah was given to Moses on Mt. Sinai – and Abraham was written in it for his faith not for his keeping of the Mosaic Laws.

Question 5: What is the use of the translation of "faith" as "faithfulness"? You wrote: "It appears to me to be a very key issue for your book. Could you give me a little more support for such a shift. (I'm not rejecting it, just want a bit more evidence)."

Yes! "Faith" in our days, and even by the end of the second century A.D. was considered to be a matter of the right doctrine, an acquiescence to a set of teachings. To have "faith" in our own day and time means to join our church, or agree with our set of teachings. I know that some of the most knowledgeable teachers of the Bible that I had in our own Christian Colleges had no faithfulness in their lives. The dean of the Bible College that I attended was considered the greatest Bible teacher – he was "faithful" to all the G.A. Party lines and celebrated Alexander Campbell's birthday every year in chapel services – but at the same time he was a practicing Homosexual. He had "faith" in western terms, but he did not have "faithfulness" in Biblical terms. The work "faith" in the Hebrew Bible is "Emuna" – the basic meaning of "Emuna" is to be 'solid,' 'firm.' In this sense the word "emuna" means 'to be true' is intensified in the passive (Niphal) form of the verb to mean 'trustworthy' or 'reliable.' I think that you can look it up in any of the Bible Dictionaries and see that the word, "faith" is best translated to mean "faithfulness" or "trustworthiness." What doctrinal point did Abraham "believe" that God reckoned it to him as righteousness? Did Abraham believe the "Trinity" – did he believe that you have to take communion every week and worship without a piano, and be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? I think that Abraham was trustworthy and trusted that God was trustworthy to keep his promises. I know many "sound" brothers in the Lord's Church that have great "faith" in repeating the right doctrines – but very little trustworthiness. On the other hand, it is impossible to be trustworthy in the matters of God without also believing the basic truths that God has revealed to mankind in His Word. Although, I must make a note of it that there are people in the world who are not able to read and write, and do not know much about church history and doctrinal disputes, but are full of trust in God – they also will be in heaven with all the saints.

I realize that these answers might rise up more questions, but this is the way of the Lord. He gives on the one hand and takes on the other hand. This way is the way the Word of God has been kept alive for so many generations. We probably will not reach a total solution on even one of the matters of life. We will always be walking on God's way and seeking to know Him better, to understand His Word in a living and fruitful way. By doing this and not stopping to be bogged down in every puddle along the highway – we will reach the place where we can know Him as we are known today – we can talk to Elijah, and Isaiah, and Yeshua himself.