

Some reflections on last week's (week 2) passage (Romans 1:18-3:20), and some reflections on the historical background to the Jews in Paul's day.

I didn't get to the end of this long passage last Sunday, partly because I wanted to end with Paul's statement "[God] will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury." (2:6-8) Something for us evangelicals to ponder.

What follows is a "diatribe" (imaginary discussion) between him and some unnamed other persons who objected to what he was saying, and a chain of quotations from the OT to clinch his point, ending in 3:20 with 'For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.'

Or, as the NLT puts it "For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are."

At this point his argument shows that we are at a dead end. (No pun intended)

But I wondered afterwards if the video was clear, taken as it was out of context. I wanted to give some context to how Paul, as a Pharisee, was thinking. He had grown up thinking, as a good Jew, that the Messiah would come as a *political* saviour. The history of Judea and its neighbouring countries in the period between the Old and New Testament is convoluted, and it's taken me a while to put together a summary. But here's my attempt:

Up until Paul's "conversion" he thought of the Messiah in political terms. The inter-testamental period was one of great upheavals between the countries in the Middle East, and Judah was caught in the middle between Egypt and Babylon. The Messiah would come to liberate the Jews.

By 166 Judea had not known independence for 400 years. They were still able to maintain their own traditions. Onias the high priest favoured separatism, while his brother, Jason, favoured Hellenization. Jason wrested control from Onias, and rewrote the constitution to be more like the constitution of Athens.

Babylon had fallen to the Greeks under Alexander. After Alexander died his kingdom was divided among his sons. In 63 BC, Pompey invaded Judea and it became subject to Rome.

There was a split between the Pharisees and Jews who believed that the future of Judea would be better served by making Jerusalem more of a multi-cultural Greek city. There was a further conflict among the progressives themselves as they disputed how far they needed to go in meeting their objectives of bringing Judea into this larger Greek world.

Some Jews didn't think Jason had gone far enough, and deposed Jason and put Menelaus in charge, (notice the Greek names they had adopted), who went to Syria where Antiochus ruled, to get support from Antiochus. Menelaus conducted even more rigorous changes. He raised the tribute paid to Antiochus, and rededicated the temple to multiple Greek deities to celebrate the multi-ethnic character of Judea. When the Judeans were delinquent in paying their dues, Antiochus himself entered the Holy of Holies, and seized further money, putting a statue of himself in the temple.

Bitter conflict broke out between Torah-observing Jews and those in political power. Judas Maccabeus and his brothers defeated the Hellenists and for a brief period Judea was free from foreign domination, until Pompey's invasion in 63 B.C.

Paul, before his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, understood the Messiah in political terms—someone who would overthrow Israel's enemies and free Israel from foreign domination. As a faithful Pharisee, Paul believed that if the Jews kept the covenant perfectly, it would provide the right environment for the Messiah to arrive.

*Jewish identity markers were
Circumcision, food laws, Sabbath observance.
By observing these the Jews felt themselves to be set apart, holy, faithful to Torah.*

Paul's preaching that identity markers didn't matter explains the hostility of synagogues to his (and Jesus') teaching.