

# BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF PAUL'S EPISTLES AND OTHER NEW TESTAMENT BOOKS

Gerrie Malan

## INTRODUCTION

My spouse and co-Bible student, Martie, and I constantly accentuate the critical necessity to read and study the Bible within its **full and correct context** in our writings (whether books or articles). If this is not done, the presence of large-scale misinterpretations is inevitable. We make this statement from our own life-long experience. When we started reading the Bible again some 12 years ago, as if for the first time, we were shaken by the realisation of our lack of knowledge – and it is as if that realisation is ongoing almost on a daily basis. One simply does not catch up on wrong teaching stretching over a span of 56 years in 12 short years.

The advanced information technology available today distributes information, irrespective of whether it is true or false, at a previously unknown speed. As a result, young people today have many more questions than ever before. Theologians presenting themselves as “Bible scientists” and who fill the world with destructive theories about the Bible simply being myths and religious folklore, or with all kinds of philosophised and untrue preaching, however sincere the intentions may be, do not help our young people to find the truth. Just think about it, a sermon on the well-known television networks is spread across the world in seconds – and that goes for truth as well as untruth! And let's be honest, the impact and influence of charismatic preachers who draw and retain attention play a large role with their impressive preaching filled with biblical terminology, expressions and references. Many mistranslations and subjective prejudices that are spread in this way do not make Bible study easier. **These realities form the whole motivation behind this essay.**

**Does truth matter? If yes, what is truth?**

This work is intended in the first place for our children and grandchildren, as well as our friends. (Any other who get to read it is regarded as a bonus of grace). Consequently, it has a different, more informal touch than all our books and articles, and does therefore not follow “technical academic” principles of writing so precisely – something I usually endeavour to apply faithfully in order to avoid accusations of abuse of the work of others as if it were my original product. I do provide a list of recommended sources at the end.

In several of our other works there are references to scholars who through past centuries accentuated that the Bible can only be interpreted or understood correctly if it is read against the background of the time and cultural environment in which it was written. There are many such scholars on record. The absence of those writers' works in the book lists and prescribed works of Bible schools amazes us. But then we realise that those books do not support existing agendas and misrepresentations of large parts of the Christian world with its many dissimilar denominations and church groups.

I herewith give two more recent viewpoints in this same regard:

- The proper context for interpreting the Bible is the context of the biblical writers - the context that produced the Bible. Every other context is alien to the biblical writers and,



therefore, to the Bible. Yet there is a pervasive tendency in the believing Church to filter the Bible through creeds, confessions, and denominational preferences. (Dr. Michael S. Heiser).

- One of the biggest problems experienced today regarding Paul’s letters is the fact that he never intended them for a worldwide readership (or audience). No, Paul wrote personal messages to people who found themselves in specific questionable situations in their spiritual walk. It is also not only a problem unique to Paul’s letters. All books of the Bible [and let me, Gerrie, specifically add, prophecies] had their original targets and can, therefore, not be understood fully and correctly outside the specific context within which they were originally written (Prof. Pinchas Schir).

**COMMENT: According to records there are already more than 40 000 denominations in the world if one includes individual or small groups of “independent churches.”**

Religious tradition has unfortunately formed humanity’s understanding and taken hearts captive to such an extent that, whenever we open the Bible, we read the existing church practices and years of teachings into it. As I have already mentioned, mistranslation in many Bible versions also contribute hereto. This realisation came to pass once again now as I saw with how many different English words



(and accompanying explanations) a single Greek word in Acts 19:20 is translated in 30 Bible versions I looked at. I could expand much on this statement, but our book, *Rightly Divide The Word*, presents important basic principles and explanations for the average Bible reader. It is available as a free download on our website – [www.hoseaconnection.org](http://www.hoseaconnection.org). In this writing I would rather focus on aspects of the world and culture of the New Testament scriptures. After all, it is my wish to help my focus group to identify Scriptural truth and not interesting, but inaccurate interpretations.

**COMMENT: I referred to “average Bible reader” above because of the remark by a well-known South African academic (or “Bible scientist”) in a letter to a local newspaper that people must bear in mind they act on a higher level of intelligence or reasoning in the academic world than we ordinary ones do.**

I conclude this introduction with some words of Jesus of Nazareth to the formal religious leaders who dominated the Jerusalem scene during His time on earth.

---

*Thus have ye [a group of scribes and Pharisees] made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition (Matthew 15:6).*

*And Jesus answering said unto them [the Sadducees], Do ye not therefore err, because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God? (Mark 12:24).*

---

## THE FIRST CHRIST FOLLOWERS

There are times when one needs only a small inkling to realise how wrong you may be in your Bible reading (or that you have been reading according to what you have retained from previous teachings, even misinterpretation instead of that which is clear in front of your very own eyes). To me this is such a subject and it was truly sobering, for example, to realise how long after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus non-Jews first became His followers and under what difficult cultural circumstances this happened.

In Acts 2 one reads that JEWS out of all nations under heaven (implying the Roman Empire) were present in Jerusalem. The nations are specifically identified by their names. It was the time of Pentecost. After Peter addressed them, some three thousand accepted his message with gladness and they were baptised. Later, after the stoning of Stephen, large-scale persecution of the (Jewish) Christ-followers commenced and they were **scattered throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria**. (Acts 8:1). **Please note, they were still living among Israelites!**

**COMMENT: In 2 Kings 17:22-23 we read that the northern ten tribes of Israel, known then as the Kingdom of Israel and with Samaria its capitol (as opposed to the two southern tribes known as the Kingdom of Judah and with capitol Jerusalem), were carried away out of their own land into exile by the king of Assyria. This happened in the year 722 B.C. The expression, however, does not mean that literally every individual Israelite was dispersed. Many still remained and lived in the northern territory, although they had been weakened in terms of numbers and people from other parts of the world had been brought to Samaria to intermix with them. In this way a possible threat to the king of Assyria was eliminated. See, for example, Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well – specifically John 4:12 and 25, during which she referred to her ancestor Jacob and the coming Messiah respectively. For Samaritan Israelites the five books of Moses were the only true Scriptures.**

The **first 11 chapters of Acts** describe a growing number of **Israelites** (commonly called Jews) who accepted Jesus as the Messiah and became His followers – and these may have included proselytes, non-Jews who had accepted the Jewish religion and way of life, and had therefore been fully regarded as Jews. If we carefully look at the content of the four Gospels, we find that it mostly describes interaction between Jesus and Judaeans (or Jews of Jerusalem and surrounding areas of Judaea) and not with non-Jews (heathens). He did sometimes travel into other areas, such as Galilee, where his hometown, Nazareth was situated. Non-Jews only became Christ-followers in large numbers some two to three decades after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. In Acts 10 we read of the events with Peter who was led by the Holy Spirit to the home of Cornelius, an Italian army officer in Caesarea after a vision of clean and unclean animals. That event led to the baptism of the group of new believers in Christ. **Then the book of Acts 11:1 reads: “And the apostles and brethren that were in Judaea heard that the Gentiles had also received the word of God.” This shows that there had not been mention of Jesus-followers among the heathens before Acts 11.**

Continuing, in verses 19-20 we read that the Jews who had been scattered after the death of Stephen travelled on, going as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch. **They preached the word [about Christ] to none but the Jews only.** Christ-followers then arrived in Antioch from Cyprus and Cyrene. At this point some Bible versions are not so clear on what was done and can become confusing. According to my 1933 Afrikaans translation, they began to talk to Greek-speaking Jews, proclaiming

the good news of Jesus Christ to them (which could have included Israelites who had been born there from ancestors scattered to that region by the king of Assyria, as well as proselytes or strangers who, through the presence of Israelites accepted the God of Israel and by circumcision also their way of life). A large number among them became believers – meaning they accepted Jesus as the prophesied and proclaimed Messiah (Acts 11:19-21).

This specific reference to Greek-speaking Jews raised questions in my mind and I decided to study the matter further. After consulting thirty other Bible versions (English translations), I have no doubt that the focus was not Greek-speaking Jews to whom the gospel became proclaimed only then, as these had already been part of the first group who were told the good news according to verse 19. The Christ-followers from Cyprus and Cyrene had in fact started to proclaim the gospel to Greek Gentiles (or heathens).

The assembly of believers in Jerusalem heard of these things and sent forth Barnabas to go as far as Antioch. After seeing the grace of God manifesting there, he went to seek Saul (Paul) in Tarsus and brought him also to Antioch (approximately 47 A.D.). They remained there for a year and taught the Christ gospel to a considerable group (Acts 11:22-26). These events, that describe the **founding and development of a mixed group of Christ-followers of Jews and non-Jews** took place in the fifth decade A.D. – Therefore some 17 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We then read (Acts 13 & 14) that Paul and Barnabas were sent to other regions by the congregation in Antioch and that Jews as well as Greeks in other Roman cities believed despite the considerable resistance Barnabas and Paul experienced all over from both Jews and non-Jews (heathens). At some stage they returned to Antioch.

**This is an important portion of history as it describes an important foundation needed to read the letters of Paul and the other authors correctly – as well as the Revelation.**

## THE MEETING IN JERUSALEM

---

*And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brethren, and said, Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved (Acts 15:1).*

---

This of course indicates that Paul and Barnabas did not apply circumcision to the non-Jew Christ-followers. (I provide more information on the status of circumcision among the Gentiles later on). This situation caused considerable dissension and disputation with them and they decided that Paul and Barnabas, and certain others of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question.

During the meeting in Jerusalem and following his experience at the home of Cornelius (Acts 10), Peter submitted that the non-Jews had already received the Holy Spirit and the blessing of God. God had therefore not put any difference between them and the Gentiles. The hearts of the Gentiles had been purified by faith. After James shared his view of what needed to be done, there was agreement that non-Jews who believed in Jesus Christ did not need to become formal Israeli converts

**True faith reflects  
righteousness that is  
rooted in God.**

by circumcision. The Gentiles were able to worship the God of Israel from within their identity as non-Jews. (As I will be indicating further on, based on the letters of Paul to the Galatians and Romans, true faith is reflected in righteousness rooted in God). **The option of choosing full conversion through circumcision and becoming fully part of the Jewish community was not taken away.**

The leadership group did decide, however, to send a letter to the congregation in Antioch, stating that believers comply with the following necessities: that they abstain from pollutions of idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood.

I have personally always understood this decision as a new one in the light of Jesus' statement to Peter in Matthew 16:19, giving him the authority to allow things and also prohibit things:

---

*<sup>18</sup>And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; (...). <sup>19</sup>And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind [therefore, prohibit] on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose [therefore, allow] on earth, shall be loosed in heaven (Matthew 16:18-19).*

---

The truth, however, is that the Jerusalem decision was **pure confirmation of Old Testament (Mosaic) regulations** in respect of non-Jews who chose to live within an Israeli community (my accentuations):

---

***NO IDOLS:** <sup>7</sup>And they shall no more offer their sacrifices unto devils, after whom they have gone a-whoring. This shall be a statute forever unto them throughout their generations. <sup>8</sup>And thou shalt say unto them, Whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers which sojourn among you, that offereth a burnt offering or sacrifice, <sup>9</sup>And bringeth it not unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, to offer it unto the Lord; even that man shall be cut off from among his people (Leviticus 17:7-9).*

***NO BLOOD:** And whatsoever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn among you, that eateth any manner of blood; I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood, and I will cut him off from among his people (Leviticus 17:10).*

***ON IMMORALITY:** Ye shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments, and shall not commit any of these abominations; neither any of your own nation, nor any stranger that sojourneth among you (Leviticus 18:26).*

---

It was therefore decided that it would be sufficient and right if new Christ-followers from the non-Jewish nations kept the **existing rules that applied since Sinai to strangers who sojourned among Israelite communities**. Circumcision was not to be enforced, not at the time when the original commands were given, and therefore also not in the new era. Those of Israelite descent would continue to abide by all the Mosaic prescriptions in view of God's covenant.

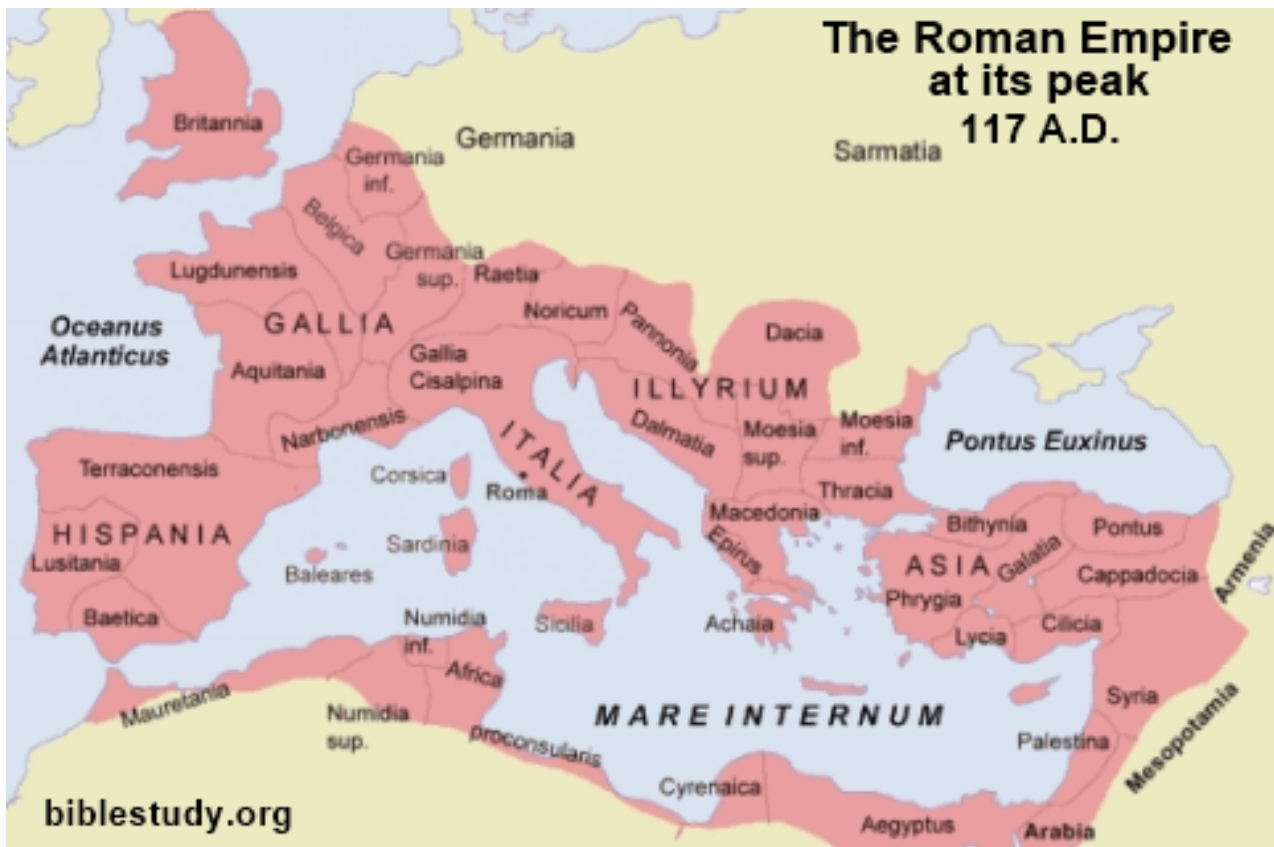
- The Jerusalem meeting probably took place in the year 49 A.D. – the same year in which Emperor Claudius banned the Jews from Rome.

These realities simply brought me to a deeper realisation of the critical importance of proper, correct context. It also implies that the average reader of the Bible, as well as the more focused Bible student, both **must consult cross reference sources** diligently – and I strongly recommend not to rely on only one such a source.

Against this background one can clearly understand how Paul could defend aspects of the gospel he proclaimed on the one hand, such as non-circumcision (e.g. Galatians 1:6) while at the same time personally maintain his own Jewish cultural foundation.

### THE GRECO-ROMAN WORLD

The world of the New Testament was known as the Roman Empire, both in geographical and political context. It stretched from England to Africa, and from Syria to Spain. The following map illustrates how enormous and powerful this Empire ruled over by an emperor and senate really was:



Now, why do I then refer to the Greco-Roman world if the former Greek Empire had been completely conquered long before by the Romans and taken up in their Empire?

The ancient Greek civilisation (and therefore culture) had in fact already become famous in the eighth century before Christ. Although, from a political viewpoint, the Greek Empire was finally conquered by the Romans in 146 B.C. – and the Roman laws applied to them since – the centuries old Greek civilisation and influence remained throughout that world up and unto the end of the so-called ancient era. Isocrates, a philosopher and orator from the fourth/fifth century

**Athens came to be the symbol of intellect and was regarded as the teacher of cities.**

A.D., for example wrote that **Athens had become the teacher of cities, which resulted in the position that the name “Greek” was no longer regarded as sign of a race, but as one of intellect.** People who were absorbed into that culture, irrespective of their original ethnic group, were regarded as “Hellenists” – someone who had adopted the language, cultural ways, traditions and even the worship practices of the Greek civilisation.

The ancient historian Josephus mentioned that the philosopher Aristotle once met a Judaeans who impressed him so much, that he declared the man to be **Greek in both language and soul.**

This new and broader Hellenistic world also profoundly influenced the Jewish culture. So many Jews had already settled in the new landscape and new language by about 200 B.C already. due to economic migration and not the exiles of previous centuries, that even their ancestral scriptures had been influenced – Hebrew and Aramaic works had been translated into Greek. These translations also exerted important influence on the ancient cultures around the Mediterranean and beyond. The Septuagint, Greek translation of the Hebrew Tanakh (or Old Testament) contributed towards introducing the God of Israel to the world of that time. Josephus also quotes a pagan geographer as saying that the Jews had made their way into every city and it was not easy to find any place in the habitable world which has not received them.

COMMENT: We need to focus carefully on the context when we use or read the word “Jews.” While it might mostly refer to descendants of the twelve tribes of Israel, there are cases, for example such as are sometimes meant by John in his gospel, where it specifically refers to Judaeans and even just to the Jewish religious leaders elite (in Jerusalem especially). That would be similar to us saying, for example, “The Dutch Reformed Church has just said this or that” – it does not mean the whole body of all DR members have made such statement, but it actually refers only to the leadership group and their decisions.

**The social structure of ancient Rome was built on status.** One’s heredity, property, wealth citizenship and freedom were the determining factors of what you were allowed to do and who you could associate with. Only males could be official citizens and vote. The status of women was defined by that of their fathers or husbands. There were clear boundaries between the different classes and this was enforced strictly and legally. Members of different classes even dressed differently and in the Coliseum seating sections were arranged by class categories. Slaves were regarded as property and were on the lowest level. Although foreigners were Roman subjects, they had to pay special taxes and enjoyed some limited protections of Roman law.

### **THE ROLE OF RELIGION**

The Roman Empire’s cities were characterised by connection to various gods. Some gods were greater than others, but all gods were greater than the human being. Every city had two kinds of residents – people and gods. People’s whole life, time, space and social relationships were structured by their god(s). (For the Jews too, their religion formed the core of their daily community life). Various religious festivals took place at certain times and at different venues, and all these venues (which included libraries and museums, for example) were regarded as sites of divine worship. It was practically impossible to live in a Greco-Roman city without living with its gods.

Ephesus, for example, was the world-renowned centre of Artemis worship (the Roman Diana, and Cybele elsewhere). She was the daughter of Zeus, sister of Apollo, and was the goddess of the hunt, animals, childbirth and virginity. In cities like that craftsmen were often organised into trade guilds – for example Ephesus, where Paul was confronted by such a group who, led by Demetrius, felt their wealth was being threatened by Paul’s message against the futility of idols (Acts 19:26-27).

**People’s whole life and social relationships revolved around gods.**

Even a person’s heredity was connected to the gods of a city. Showing respect to the gods of others was a normal aspect of life. Acknowledging the gods of others had actually been a centuries-old approach of the Israelites too:

---

*Who is like unto thee, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like thee, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders? (Exodus 15:11)*

*For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods (Psalm 95:3).*

---

The difference lay therein that the Israelites worshiped their God as the one God (which, of course, found resistance in the Greco-Roman world):

---

*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our GOD is one LORD (Deuteronomy 6:4).*

---

This is the first sentence of a traditional morning and evening prayer of the Israelites and is called the *Shema*. The word ‘*shema*’ (or *Sh’ma*) means ‘to hear.’

The commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me’, states that Israel should not allow the presence of other gods before the Lord (Exodus 20:3). The acceptance that such other gods (idols) existed was therefore not prohibited, but their worship alongside of God is forbidden, however. (This realisation really accentuated the background of the admonitions of the seven congregations in the book of Revelation on their degeneration in various ways into syncretism or mixed religion).

If someone in the Greco-Roman world changed his exclusive loyalty to another god, non-Jews regarded that as changing his ethnicity and therefore the rejection of his ancestors, his whole family, his nation and their gods. Today we still see similar reactions in some religious environments, especially against people who dare to become Christ-followers.

Pagans of course did not have to visit Jerusalem to encounter the Jewish God. As Jews lived throughout the Empire, pagans could become involved in these communities in various ways and in the process become attracted to the God of the Jews. The Jews, on the other hand, could be influenced by the pagan religions in similar fashion. **[If one studies the letters to the seven congregations in the book of Revelation carefully and within the context of the respective time and cultural environments, you can understand the golden thread of objections to their mixed religions, also called syncretism].** By understanding the mixed religions in those environments, it is no surprise to find that Jews could also be influenced by it – and even more so when economic wealth was at stake as was the case of the Laodicean congregation (Revelation 3:17).



If one reads the Bible record about Paul's life and work attentively, it will show that he consistently kept to his Jewish culture and traditions, therefore faith in the one God, but with specific accentuation of Jesus (of Nazareth) as the prophesied Messiah and Son of God who was one with the Father. This might seem like a contradiction here, but it will become clear in the following sections.

---

*For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there are gods many, and lords many,) But to us there is but one God, the Father of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him (1 Corinthians 8:5-6).*

---

## THE GALATIANS AND ROMANS

Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans form a primary foundation of Christian theology, with Romans often being called the "Christianity's textbook of systematic theology." Whereas the letter to the Romans was written some 8 years after the one to the Galatians, it is important to understand the two together, because both address aspects of the recipients' identity in relationship to Israel and Jesus Christ. I do wish to accentuate again that we should not try to read any of Paul's letters as if it was addressed to a broad and general group. Each one was focused on specific matters and problems the group to whom it was written had been experiencing.

**COMMENT: In the case of Paul's letter to the Colossians, he specifically requested that when they have read it, the letter should also be read in the congregation of Laodicea. The Colossians, on the other hand, was requested to also read the letter from Laodicea (Colossians 4:16)].**

### Two pertinent approaches are seen with regard to the Galatians and Roman:

- The Galatians letter (49 A.D.) was addressed to God-fearing Gentiles who were under pressure from other persons that they could only benefit from accepting faith in the Jewish Christ if they formally became Jews and aligned themselves with the covenants of Israel through circumcision. **As opposed to the case of the believers in Rome, this group was Paul's own disciples** (see Galatians 1:6, for example).
- The letter to the Romans (57 A.D.) was also addressed to non-Jewish followers of Jesus Christ, but who found it problematic to have close ties with the Jews. **They had apparently been established as house fellowships through the work of Jewish Christ-followers.** At that time the inhabitants of Rome showed great resistance to Jews due to political undercurrents and governmental resistance against any religious group who tried to convert people to their religion (so-called proselytism). As a result, as well as the lack of faith in Jesus as their Messiah among broader Israel (or Jews), Paul's focus in this letter was the importance of unity with Israel despite their errors.

One must remember that "conversion" to Israel's God was regarded as treason by the Roman emperor. Jews had been expelled from Rome twice before due to their "aggressive missionary approach" – and the same happened under the rule of emperor Claudius. Rome of Paul's time struggled with religious and cultural identity and the Jews did not make this easier. Romans who became Christ-followers were also seen as having become full converts to Jewish ways of life. As I

have previously noted Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome in approximately 49 A.D. Only non-Jewish members of the home fellowships remained in Rome.

Studying these two letters in isolation of each other and without the specific contexts that applied, it may appear that they contain serious contradictions. Bear in mind too, that Paul knew the Galatians personally, but apparently not the Romans.

### **Letter to the Galatians**

The letter to the Galatians is often presented as descriptive of Paul's theology of Gospel versus Law, Freedom versus Slavery, and Christianity versus Judaism. Please note that the concepts of Christianity and Judaism as known names of faith groups had not yet existed at that time. It is also a mistake to think that this letter is proof of Paul's rejection of circumcision as such, as well as the Torah (Law) and the Jewish way of life in general. The outcome of the Jerusalem meeting I discussed earlier, already explains this matter for us. I will nonetheless provide more examples of circumcision or not further on.

What Paul was in fact doing here, was to oppose the aspect of "compelled full conversion to becoming Jews." He shows that their identity is rooted in Christ and not in Israel. The presence of the Holy Spirit connected them to God and to Israel, and not formal conversion rites and social acceptance. Paul's reference to "another gospel" is not Torah or Jewish grouping (that later developed the name 'Judaism'), but to a teaching that non-Jews had only one path to Israel's God – full conversion to being accepted a Jew.

**One can live according to the commandments of Torah (Law) without faith in God as the one God.**

Paul explains an important principle in chapter 3 and verses 11-12. It is righteousness that counts and no one is justified (or made righteous) by Torah (the Law). That is only attained by faith rooted in God. People may live by the Torah, yet be without faith that is rooted in God. The Torah demands obedience to the commandments, but it does not demand faith. In addition, Paul accentuates

the fact that this faith in Christ Jesus had come to the non-Jews (Gentiles) and was confirmed in Him.

The social status of the Galatians carried no weight before God and the spiritual gifts they received had nothing to do with them being Jews or non-Jews, male or female, or even slaves. They had become sons (children) and heirs of God according to God's promise to Abraham (Galatians 3). The Torah protected and preserved the children of Israel going towards the faith that would be revealed in Christ and now was.

Paul then includes an admonition about certain practices and rituals they were following. Although he did not make specific reference to it, I believe Paul had God's reprimand through the prophet Isaiah in mind (Isaiah 29:13) and which was repeated to the scribes and Pharisees of Jerusalem by Jesus of Nazareth (Matthew 15:7-9):

---

*<sup>7</sup>Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, <sup>8</sup>This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. <sup>9</sup>But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.*

---

The apostle continues his message with a discussion of the earthly Jerusalem and its limitations as against the heavenly (or spiritual) Jerusalem, the mother of all, admonishment to preserve the freedom in Christ by serving one another in love, the needlessness of circumcision, and works of the flesh opposed to the fruit of the Holy Spirit. He concludes with calls to fulfill the law of Christ by bearing one another's burdens and by sowing in the Spirit.

### **Letter to the Romans**

While this letter was directed to a specific group experiencing specific problems in Paul's time, it also holds important principles for us seeing that we are often confronted with groups (including Afrikaner groups in South Africa), who love to present themselves as "the new Israel." Such groups are also known for insisting on keeping Israel's Torah based rituals.

Broadly viewed, Paul addresses specific theological tension and wrestling with identity concerns. As indicated earlier, the letter was written in about 57 A.D. The Jews had been expelled for part of the decade they had come through – therefore also the Jewish Christ-followers (examples are Aquila and Priscilla, 1 Corinthians 16:9). Considering the environment of mixed religion and absence of people who could have corrected them, the probability of confusion should come as no surprise. In his letter Paul shows the Romans that, despite the unbelief of many Jews, a glorious future in God still awaited Israel. This simply was the nature of the covenant with Israel.

Paul calls upon both Jews and non-Jews to reconcile and serve the resurrected Christ in harmony. Both groups equally needed God's justifying grace. True righteousness emanating from God came through faith and trust in God, and not by the Torah. The latter had a different purpose and was not opposite to faith.

---

*What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin (Romans 3:9).*

*<sup>22</sup>Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: <sup>23</sup>For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup>Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:22-24).*

*<sup>28</sup>Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law. <sup>29</sup>Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: <sup>30</sup>Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith. <sup>31</sup>Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law. (Romans 3:28-31).*

---

In Chapter 9 Paul laments Israel's unbelief, but rejoices at the same time in the acceptance of the good news among the nations. These two aspects together form part of God's greater plan. Then Paul continues in Chapter 10 to explain righteousness coming from faith and trust in God, contrasting it with Israel's quest to achieve it through disciplined obedience to Torah – something that sadly became a self-focused effort. Yes, Israel had the Torah, but salvation was available to all people. God did not make a distinction between Jews and non-Jews in this regard:

---

*<sup>11</sup>For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed. <sup>12</sup>For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him. <sup>13</sup>For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:11-13).*

---

**Just throwing in a little question:** Can you see how pertinently Paul applies his Jewish *Shema* concept? “*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord*” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Should God have made a difference in His saving grace, it would not have made sense to present Him as the one Lord.

In Chapter 11 Paul cautions the Roman believers to think carefully about their relationship with God, using the metaphor of the olive tree’s roots that support the branches. They (the Romans) have been grafted into a mature olive tree among the natural branches, as opposed to Israel who were the natural branches. Paul cautions them to understand that God did not adopt the non-Jews into His family in the place of the Jews. God’s hardening towards Israel was only partial and temporary until the fulness of the Gentiles had come in.

Chapters 12-15 accentuate the spiritual fruit as the only true evidence of righteousness which is from God. He gives instruction about aspects such as serving God and one another also, obedience to the civil authorities, loving one’s neighbour, purity, and tolerance towards those who are weak in faith. Paul closes his letter with customary greetings and admonitions.

It is important that we understand how comprehensively Paul addresses the question of the Romans’ identity in God and their relationship with the Jews. He makes it clear that Israel’s place has not been taken before God by other groups or nations, but that each has its own identity before God as believers in Christ.

To conclude, I quote two core verses:

---

*<sup>1</sup>I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. <sup>2</sup>And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God (Romans 12:1-2).*

---

The Greek word translated as “world” is *Aion*, includes the meaning of an era or period. In my opinion it refers to their specific time frame in this case, therefore the character of society. It is an understanding that fits the “world” of our time quite well.

## **PAUL AND THE QUESTION OF CIRCUMCISION**

In my discussion of the meeting between Barnabas and Paul with the leadership group in Jerusalem (Acts 15), I already pointed out that the decision not to force circumcision upon non-Jews, was in accordance with stipulations from Leviticus. In his letter to the Galatians Paul accentuated that they had received full salvation through their trust and faith in Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Circumcision would unnecessarily place the burden of keeping all stipulations of the Torah upon them and nullify the benefit they had received in Christ.

In the Greco-Roman worldview, the human body was regarded as perfection. This explains why so many ancient paintings and statues displayed nudity. Circumcision was seen as mutilation according to that worldview and therefore very strongly resisted. To the Greeks and Romans circumcision was a barbaric and superstitious practice.

Paul repeated his caution to be beware of false apostles and their insistence on circumcision in the letter to the disciples in Philippi:

---

*<sup>2</sup>Beware of the dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the concision [katatomē].  
<sup>3</sup>For we are the circumcision [peritomē], which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:2-3).*

---

Paul is contrasting two expressions here. The Greek word *katatomē* literally means to cut off and therefore refers to mutilation in this context. *Peritomē*, on the other hand, has a spiritual connotation and distinguished God's chosen Israel from other nations for a specific purpose.

We find similar admonition against circumcision in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. If they should be Jewish descendants, they should continue in their calling. If they were not such descendants, they need not convert to Jewness, but follow the commandments of God. It is not important for non-Jews to undergo a change in social status or anatomy, but to live a life of righteousness according to God's commandments. Their status before God is more important than their status in the Israelite and even broader community.

### **Timothy and Titus**

It is important to understand that Paul was not against the Jewish religion (which later became known as Judaism) or the Israeli practice of circumcision. After all, he personally circumcised Timothy (Acts 16:1-3). But on the other hand, he did not insist on the circumcision of Titus. Are we dealing with contradictory actions by Paul here? The answer is: No!

Let us examine two applicable portions of Scripture:

---

*<sup>1</sup>Then came he to Derbe and Lystra: and behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timōtheüs, the son of a certain woman, which was a Jewess, and believed; but his father was a Greek. (...) <sup>3</sup>Him would Paul have to go forth with him; and took and circumcised him because of the Jews which were in those quarters: for they all knew that his father was a Greek (Acts 16:1-3).*

*<sup>2</sup>And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. <sup>3</sup>But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised (Galatians 2:2-3).*

---

These two differences of approach were driven by who the mothers of the two persons were. Timothy's mother was a Jewess, and in keeping with the tradition of determination of Jewish identity through the mother as it had developed by that time, he should have been circumcised long before. The reason that it had not been done might have been objection by his Greek father due to his rejection

of the practice as mutilation. The traditional teaching that Paul had been under pressure to do so as he did not circumcise Titus, is simply not true. Their circumstances differed. It was the right thing for Paul to do in the case of Timothy, but not that of Titus, seeing that he was a full-blown Greek and with no Jewish ancestry.

## CONCLUSION

I wish to accentuate that I am not trying to be controversial with this article – being controversial holds no joy of reason for self-satisfaction. My questions, my study of the Bible content and relevant subjects have one purpose only, and that is to know biblical truth amidst the swamp of theological and philosophical theories that have developed through the past centuries and that confront the Christian today. I agree with Ephraim Currier who wrote in 1841, that if it is important for us to have the Bible, then it is equally important that we should understand the Bible correctly. This necessarily includes an understanding of the biblical community structures, as well as an evaluation of its fruit. Being controversial is unfortunately unavoidable. Breaking through the wall of tradition I have found, is as difficult as trying to break through a granite rock. And I am most certainly not alone in my experience in this regard.



This discussion made me realise once again how easily lack of knowledge of the true context can have us slip into a position of misunderstanding the biblical text. And such misunderstanding can have an important impact on our life here and now. I am thinking, for example, about a current situation in Australia where one of their best rugby players has been stripped of his multi-year and multi-million-dollar contract with the nation's national rugby body, because of his utterances about hell awaiting gays. While he has exercised his constitutional freedom of religion, it is such a pity that the centuries-old unbiblical church doctrine of the hell lies at the foundation of his great loss. (I provide a link to my article on the hell concept within the Biblical context below).

The cultural and religious realities of Paul's time leave me with no doubt of the influence of that time's syncretism (mixed religions) on the development of the greatly diversified institutional church system of the world and its traditions. The records of church history through the centuries certainly support such a conclusion when compared to the Bible record. **It most certainly also accentuates the great grace of the One God (Deuteronomy 6:4) for humanity.**

Whether the reader agrees wholly or only in part, or even completely rejects the content and reasonings in this article (and any others from my website), I would have peace knowing that it was considered and tested by readers against the Bible and true context of the time and environment in which Paul wrote his epistles (or letters). The Bible (within its true context, of course) should be the plumb-line for us all.

## SOURCES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary stimulation for me to write this relatively concise article has been a year-long (so far) monthly study of a new module on the ancient cultures of Bible time, specifically the Jewish and Greco-Roman countries, through the Israel Bible Center. I was surprised to find their approach completely different from the traditional Torah-observant groups. They clearly have an objective and high standards approach. Yes, I may differ on some points – which is in keeping with my own approach to take personal responsibility for what I accept and believe. That, however, does not defer

in any way from their high-quality content. Their website can be visited at <https://israelbiblecenter.com/>.

All Bible quotations are from *The Scripture Reference Study Bible*, 1999, compiled and edited by F.C. Thompson. Published by R.L. Munce Publishing Inc. Indian Rocks Beach, Florida. © G.L. Hill Ltd.

A book referred to several times in the first of two modules of the Israel Bible Center on Paul's world, is *Paul: The Pagan's Apostle*, by Paula Fredriksen (Yale University Press, 2017). It is available in printed and e-book formats.

One should never disregard the value of ancient writings, such as the historical accounts of Josephus and others.

My and co-Bible student (and wife) Martie's website url is [www.hoseaconnection.org](http://www.hoseaconnection.org). There are several free e-books and many articles can be downloaded free. I recommend the book *Rightly Divide The Word* as a valuable study aid.

In my conclusion to this article I referred to the unbiblical doctrine of hell – you can read and download my discussion of the topic at the following link:  
<https://www.hoseaconnection.org/docs/Hell%20%20A%20Centuries%20Old%20False%20Teaching.pdf>.

**29 May 2019**

**This article is dedicated to our great-grandson Liewan Nel, born in 2016, and his generation. I believe they will know the Truth and the Truth will set them free.**