

- f. The second half of chapter two provided for the Jew a painful, and perhaps even shocking, revelation. Contrary to common Jewish conviction, his circumcision and possession of the Law of Moses provided him with no righteous standing or preferred status before God. Like the “lawless” Gentile, he, too, would be rewarded according to the objective righteousness of his deeds. The criterion by which eternal life is to be gained is the same for all men: eternal life is found in communion with God, which in turn demands conformity to the divine character and likeness as set forth in the Law. The result is that having the Law and circumcision is of value only if one keeps the Law’s requirements (2:12-13, 25).

After establishing this core principle by which the Jew and Gentile are placed on the same level in terms of righteousness, Paul anticipated what was sure to be the response of his readers: if these things are true, “*then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?*” If a Jew gains no special privilege by virtue of having the Law and circumcision, then it could be argued that there is no benefit whatsoever in being a Jew. Such reasoning, however, is not only bad logic, its application in the present case leads to a false conclusion. For the fact that possessing the Law and circumcision brings no exemption from the obligation of personal righteousness does not intimate that the Jew has enjoyed no privilege of any kind in the progress of redemptive history. This question of the Jew’s privilege introduces the third chapter, and provides the contextual platform for his discussion in verses 3:1-8.

At the outset it must be admitted that these eight verses have proved to be the most difficult in the entire Roman epistle for many scholars throughout the centuries. The difficulty is attributed to both structure and content.

- As to the former, Paul here poses as series of rhetorical questions that he himself responds to. This structure, although consistent with the diatribe format of the preceding context, leaves some commentators uncertain as to whether he was articulating his own questions or posing them in anticipation of how his readers would respond to what he had already said. When all factors are considered, it appears best to view 3:1-8 as Paul presenting, in the form of a series of questions, what he regarded to be natural responses to his argumentation (ref. 3:1, 3, 5, 7, 8a). And having raised those questions, he then responded appropriately to each of them according to his own conviction (ref. 3:2, 4, 6, 8b). This format does not exactly reproduce the direct diatribe style of the previous context, but it serves the same purpose of developing and strengthening his argument.
- With respect to content, the greatest difficulty arises from the speed with which his argumentation moves from one specific issue to another. In his own mind Paul grasped the implication of each point he was making, and so immediately shifted the direction of his instruction to interact with that implication. This has led some scholars to conclude that his argumentation in this passage is fragmented and even incoherent.

Among those who would not agree with this assessment, two approaches have been most commonly followed. The first view is that Paul's focus was upon the Jews throughout the entire passage of 3:1-8. The more traditional approach is that in verses 3:1-3, or possibly 3:1-4, Paul was referring to the Jews, but that, transitioning into verse 3:5, he shifted his focus to mankind in general. In other words, the conclusions he reached about God's faithfulness and Israel's unbelief could be rightly extrapolated to the entire world of men. This appears to be the best view.

Commenting on this passage Moo observes: "*What begins, then, as an attempt to answer an objection to Paul's ironing out of distinctions between Jews and Gentiles (vv. 1-2) becomes a frustratingly brief discussion of the relationship between Israel's unbelief and God's righteousness and, ultimately, between human sin and God's purposes.*" Yet, despite the very real difficulties that are present, it is clearly wrong to argue either for Paul's incoherency or the hopeless obscurity of the passage. When considered carefully in the context of his argumentation to this point, as well as within his overall theological framework, Paul's meaning becomes clear and compelling.

- 1) As noted, the context begins with Paul raising an anticipated objection concerning the Jews' privilege (3:1). Given all that he has said about the irrelevance of the Law and circumcision to Israel's righteousness, this is precisely the question that would be expected. Paul's response was that, contrary to what might appear to be the case, the Jew does in fact have great advantage in comparison to the Gentile; his unique privilege is "*great in every respect*" (3:2; ref. 9:1-5 and Ephesians 2:11-12). This being so, it is noteworthy that Paul cited only one such advantage, namely *being entrusted with the oracles of God* (3:2). The reason for this is that every aspect of the Jews' privilege - whether circumcision, the covenants, the adoption of sons, the Law and Levitical system, the prophets, the promises, etc. - has its foundation and origination in God's oracles.

The noun rendered "oracles" (*logia*) occurs only three other times in the New Testament, none of which are in Paul's own writings (Acts 7:38; Hebrews 5:12; 1 Peter 4:11). In general the term is roughly synonymous with the idea of *utterance*, and in its New Testament contexts it specifically refers to *God's revealed word as taken upon the lips of men*.

Various interpretations of Paul's statement have been put forward, but it is clearly the case that he could not have been referring to the New Testament scriptures since they did not yet exist. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that he was speaking of the oracles of God that came specifically to the Jews. *For these reasons, his meaning must be constrained to the utterances that comprised God's self-revelation and ongoing interaction with the nation of Israel*. Most specifically, these utterances have reference to the Old Testament writings.

As well, the context indicates that Paul was particularly concerned with God's *promises* and the obligations demanded of Israel because of them.

- This is evident first from the fact that these oracles entrusted to Israel implicate both *God's faithfulness* and *Israel's faith* (3:3). Because of this Paul's *logia* cannot be restricted to the Law of Moses or any other specific component of divine revelation.
- Second, when Paul's statements are considered in the larger context of his argument - namely, God's fulfillment of the Law and prophets by the coming of Jesus Christ and His revelation of divine righteousness in the gospel (cf. 1:1-7, 16-17, 3:19-26, 16:25-26) - his meaning in using the noun "logia" becomes evident:

*Paul was using it in reference to the whole structure and development of God's revelatory interaction with Israel, and that specifically as it contributed to His predetermined purpose in the upward movement of redemptive history and His eventual fulfillment of all of His promises in Christ. (ref. Ephesians 1:3-12)*

The entire structure of God's revelation in the Scripture is that of *promise/fulfillment*, which indicates the manner in which the Old and New Testaments must be viewed from the perspective of both continuity and discontinuity. The word spoken to the fathers and the prophets had the same ultimate object and the same essential content, but the upward movement of redemptive history allowed that word to develop in its fullness and clarity until the ordained time of fulfillment. God's revelation of His Redeemer developed and brightened with the passing of the centuries, so that, in the fullness of the times, the "hidden mysteries" were disclosed and the "shadows" yielded themselves to the substance they predicted and portrayed. This understanding lies at the heart of Zacharias' Spirit-led benediction and the prayer of praise uttered by Simeon (Luke 1:67-79, 2:25-32; cf. also Galatians 3:1-29, 4:1-11; Ephesians 2:11-3:11; Colossians 1:24-27, 2:16-17; Hebrews 1:1-4; 1 Peter 1:10-12; etc.).

- 2) This "gospel" emphasis of God's *logia* is important in that it shows the gravity of the Jews' refusal to believe it (3:3). Though they had been entrusted with the oracles of promise and the blessings attached to them, many did not believe. In fact, *unbelief* constituted the defining legacy of the nation of Israel from the point of its institution at Sinai. While Moses was yet on the mountain receiving the tablets of the covenant, the sons of Israel - who had just pledged themselves to entire fidelity (Exodus 24:1-8) - were engaging themselves in idolatrous rebellion against God (Exodus 32:1-6). This was the start of a pattern that would mark the nation throughout the centuries and would culminate with their rejection of the promised and long-anticipated Deliverer and King.