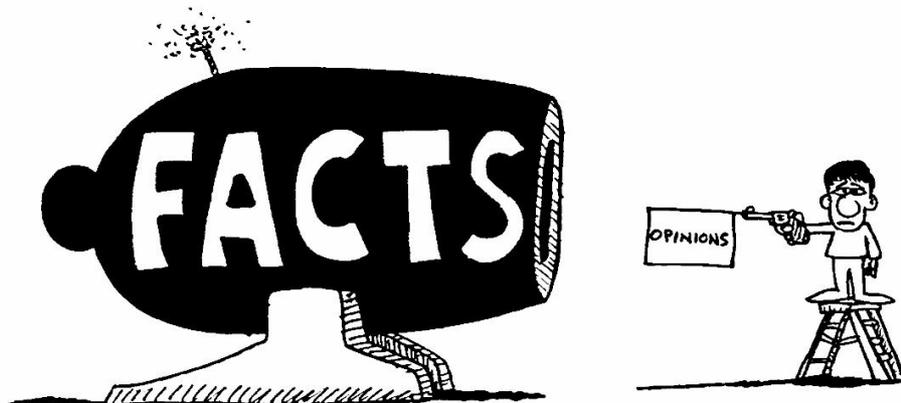


Romans 14 and the Sabbath Commandment

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In the course of dialog over issues that we, as Messianic believers, hold to be essential, the Sabbath is a regular subject. Yet as part of the larger body of Messiah we recognize that the majority of our brothers and sisters in the Christian church have been taught that the Sabbath has been abolished in favor of Sunday. While discussing the validity of the Sabbath, [Romans 14:5-6](#) inevitably becomes the pivotal text appealed to in proof that the Sabbath is no longer to be set apart from the six days of work. In this short essay I would like to make a brief inquiry into this text, and offer some suggestions for its interpretation.

The Context

The context in which Paul writes that “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day” is one in which Paul is addressing differing *opinions*: “Now accept the one who is weak in the faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions.” (14:1). First, we should note that Paul is not giving his opinion here, but restating what must have been the varying opinions of others within the synagogue at Rome. In the end, Paul is unwilling to side with either opinion, indicating both are valid. Secondly, it ought to be recognized that the issue of Sabbath observance (as well as other Torah observances) would not have been handled within the realm of *opinion*. While there were certainly varying opinions on *how* the Sabbath ought to be kept, there is no record of debate on *if* the Sabbath was to be kept. In other words, the issue of keeping or guarding the Sabbath simply could not have been a matter of differing opinions in the time of Paul, for it constituted one of the two highest concerns of observance among all of the various sects of Judaism (the other being that of purities).

Thirdly, the context in which our text is found is one in which Paul is concerned that the opinion of the one *weak* in faith be honored by those who are (apparently) stronger in faith: “Now accept the one who is weak in faith but not for passing judgment on his opinions.” (14:1). If Nanos (*The Mystery of Romans*, Fortress Press, 1997) is correct that those referred to as weak in faith are in fact pious Jews in the Roman synagogue who had not yet confessed Yeshua to be the Messiah, then we clearly cannot interpret the passage as referring to Jews who considered the observance of the Sabbath as a matter of personal opinion! But in addition, those Paul addresses, those stronger in faith, are admonished not to judge the opinion of the one weak in faith. That is to say, the opinion of the one weak in faith is still to be considered a valid opinion. The argument of those who say the Sabbath has been abolished in favor of Sunday usually say the basis for such a change is the cross, that the death of Yeshua changed the emphasis from creation (Sabbath) to redemption (Sunday, the supposed day of Yeshua’s resurrection). Such an argument, however, could never allow Paul to say that the *opinion* of the one weak in faith, i.e., the one who (for sake of argument) still favored the Sabbath over Sunday, should be received as valid. For if the change from Sabbath to Sunday is based upon the redemptive work of Messiah in His sacrificial death, *then what He abolished cannot be in any manner valid for those who are saved by His death.*

Fourthly, the context is clearly one of halachic differences, not one of a theological progression from established

Law to the abolishment of Law. The first illustration given by Paul is that of food: “One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables” (14:2). Later on in the chapter (14:14-15) Paul elaborates on this issue of eating by identifying the conflict as a matter of purities. When Paul writes that one “may eat all things”, he is talking about food in the context of purity laws (not the abolishment of the kosher laws given in Torah. “Clean/unclean” is a higher level of distinction than “allowed/forbidden.”). Clearly the Laws of purity comprised one of the primary issues for the 1st Century halachic authorities, if the bulk of material on this matter in the Mishnah is any indication. Apparently, the same questions of purity halachah existed in the synagogue at Rome: is meat offered to idols impure?; if Gentiles handle the food is it unclean?; can a Jew eat meat which has been slaughtered by Gentiles? These and many other questions formed the debate about the 1st Century halakah of clean and unclean foods, and was no doubt an issue in the community Paul addresses. One person could eat meat handled and sold by Gentiles, while another would avoid it altogether, preferring a vegetarian meal to suffering a wounded conscience.

It is important to see that the issue of days is in the same sphere as the conflict over clean and unclean foods. Neither Paul nor any Jew of his day would have questioned whether or not G-d’s appointed times (including the weekly Sabbath) should have been kept any more than they would have questioned whether or not it was now okay to eat pork. There were disputes, of course, exactly *how* the various laws regarding the appointed times were to be observed, and this, like the purity debates, was surely what Paul writes of in Romans 14.

As an aside, I would likewise remark that the vision given to Peter as recorded in [Acts 11:4-10](#) of the sheet let down from heaven is often naively interpreted by the Christian church. The text indicates that there were 4-legged animals, crawling creatures (ἄρπυγες, used in Lev 11 for insects, some of which, like locust, are edible) and birds, and Peter comments that he has never eaten anything “unholy or unclean.” From this it is automatically assumed that the sheet contained only “unholy and unclean” animals, that is, those prohibited by the Torah. But for Peter, “unholy and unclean” may have meant “not conforming to rabbinic halachah.” For some sects of the 1st Century, to eat meat from a clean animal which was not rabbinically slaughtered would still have been considered eating meat which was unclean. The command for Peter to “kill (the Greek word [θύω] indicates “sacrifice”) and eat” must have seemed strange to him since such activity, by rabbinical standards, would need to be carried out either by a priest or a recognized shochen (certified butcher). We too quickly assume that G-d is commanding Peter to eat meat He had earlier forbidden in the Torah, when in fact He most likely was commanding Peter to eat meat which did not conform to the rabbinic halachah which had been added over and above the written Torah.

The Specific Situation

Verse 5 gives the specifics of the illustration Paul wishes to use: “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day.” Exactly what situation does Paul describe? If, for the sake of argument, we say Paul is speaking of the weekly Sabbath, then we would understand his words this way: “One regards the Sabbath as more important than all other days, while another regards every day with equal importance.” What would this mean? Did the one who regarded all days as equal regard all days as the Sabbath or all days as common, i.e., that there is no Sabbath? To regard every day as a Sabbath would, in the context of the 1st Century, be impossible, for that would mean there would be no time for any work, denying the statement of G-d that man would gain his food by the sweat of his face. Equally impossible is the position that the one who regarded all days as the same considered all days common. In such a scenario there would be no longer any Divine injunction to set apart the weekly Sabbath or the appointed Festivals. For Paul to have entirely abolished the institutions of the Sabbath and the Appointed Times in such an indirect, casual statement is simply impossible for at least two reasons. First, along with the laws of ritual purity, the Sabbath issue was of highest importance in the 1st Century Judaism and could not have simply been dismissed without an obvious and public outcry. Secondly, from both the Torah and Prophetic scriptures we learn that Sabbath is very important to G-d. That He commanded capital punishment for breaking the Sabbath indicates the level of importance He placed upon it. Would not Paul have been marked as a false teacher had he, without any explanation, simply overturned a direct commandment of the Torah and contradicted the prophets of G-d who came before him?

In the structure of our text, Paul parallels the one who is able to eat meat with the one who regards the days as

equal; (v. 2) “One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables. . . . (v. 5) One man regards one day above another, another regards every day. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.” (Note that the parallel is in a chiasmic form, i.e., A/B/B/A, where the first and last clause are parallel and the inner two are parallel.) I would suggest that Paul is describing two groups of people: one group believes they can eat all things and observe what day they choose. A second group believes they can eat only vegetables and must observe specific days. So in attempting to understand how these two groups defined themselves, it would be helpful to ask the question: “what do food issues and observance of days have in common as criteria for defining different halakah in the 1st Century Judaisms?”

It seems to me that their commonality is found in the way the two groups approached the Oral Torah, the traditions of the Sages. The Oral Torah had set all kinds of halachah for eating, traditions which had caused the Jewish people to remain separate from their non-Jewish neighbors. This rabbinically imposed seclusion had rendered them ineffective as the light to the nations, one of the key elements of their divinely appointed mission. As Yeshua had charged, by their traditions they had set aside the Torah of G-d (Mt 15:3 [L](#), 6 [L](#); Mk 7:5 [L](#), 8 [L](#), 9 [L](#), 13 [L](#)). Yet those who had come to confess Yeshua as the Messiah, and followed His teaching, had come to realize that those traditions which were man produced and were actually roadblocks to being a light to the nations, these traditions had to be discarded. Thus, a follower of Yeshua may have felt free to eat meat which had been purchased from the Gentile market (as long as the prohibition against eating blood was observed) but a Jewish worshipper who had not yet confessed Yeshua as Messiah might have had a difficult time eating together with others in the congregation when such items were part of the meal, because the Oral Torah he had lived with for the greater part of his life taught that to eat meat touched by Gentiles was to participate in idolatry (for often Gentiles would evoke the help of their gods in the exercise of their business efforts, thus food purchased in the Gentile market was always suspect of having been offered to idols.)

I would like to suggest a similar scenario for the matter of days. We know that there existed a halakic debate over exactly when the festival of Shavuot (Pentecost) was to be celebrated, a debate which existed primarily between the Pharisees and the Saducees. The divided decision rested upon the interpretation of [Lev 23:11](#) [L](#), [15](#) [L](#), in which the phrase “after the Sabbath” determined the point at which the bringing in of the omer was to commence. Should one begin to bring the omer of grain to the priests on the day following Pesach, Pesach being a Sabbath regardless of what day of the week it fell upon, or should the omer counting begin on the day following the weekly Sabbath, i.e., always starting on the first day of the week? The Pharisees opted from the former, and the Saducees the later. This being the case, these two most prominent sects of the Jews celebrated one of the appointed festivals, Shavuot, on different days because their starting point for counting the required 50 days was different.

Now suppose there were both Saducees and Pharisees in the synagogue at Rome to which Paul addresses his remarks. Like the halachic differences regarding the purities of food, there would have likewise existed a difference in halachic decisions on when Shavuot should be celebrated. In this regard, one man regarded one day as the correct day to set apart for the festival, while another man could have celebrated Shavuot on either of the days chosen by the differing halachah. This would be particularly true for a Gentile who had come to faith in Messiah, and who was learning the Torah and had no long tradition of halachah in regard to it. What is more, it seems that Paul himself had no definitive decision on the matter, and simply admonished them to be convinced in their own minds, but not to consider the opinion of one group to exclude the view of the other. Here, then, is a valid situation, well documented from early halachah, where a community of pious Jews disagreed on when a Torah festival was to be celebrated. To apply the Pauline phrase “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day” to this scenario makes perfect sense, both contextually and historically. To apply it to teach the irrelevance of the Sabbath is weak contextually and impossible historically.

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