

Romans 14:1-23

Weak and Strong in the Community

The issues were wrapped around personal prohibitions and habits.

- Paul uses an example of eating only vegetables (not non-kosher foods) as a characteristic of the person “weak in faith”
- Before we identify them, let us look at the actual instruction.
 - If a person is “weak in faith” we are to not attempt to destroy them by forcing them into practices they might consider offensive. The “strong”, who apparently have more choices in their food habits, are not to flaunt it, not to force those into those sorts of habits. Rather they are to have sensitivity for they are as much a part of the community as the strong are.
 - A hint that some of this might be due to masters forcing servants to be a particular way.
 - The principle is to make allowances for individual consciences, especially in regards to foods. The right to eat does not trump the need to build community.

The central issue revolved around food habits, which, in the Diaspora, was always an issue. It was a rare Jewish community that could have their own kosher food supply.

If we remember the central theme of Paul here, the Jewish people returning to the Roman community, then we can get some hints about the identities.

The Weak and the Strong Romans 14:13-23 Continued.

Who were “the Weak”? And who were the “Strong”?

Historical understandings:

- Gentile, former pagans abstaining from meat due to paganism
- “legalists” Jewish or Gentile who insist on keeping kosher as a way to earn righteousness (Yeshua calls these lacking faith, not weak in it)
- Jews who actually keep Jewish calendar instead of abrogating it for anything else. (classical Augustinian, Lutheran, and Catholic views on abrogation of Torah)
- New believers, Jewish or Gentile who are still attached to ascetic practices as a matter of faith.
- Another possibility: Jews not yet knowing Messiah. This is possible due to the Jewish nature of the community.
- The “strong” were being rebuked, not the weak. Perhaps Paul is being a bit ironic. The strong are acting selfishly, which is really a characteristic of weakness.
- Issues revolved around food habits.
 - Judaism was not known to be big on being vegetarian.
 - Former pagans would possibly have issues with meat due to idol worship practices. Hence they would be vegetarians.
 - Jews who were particularly concerned about eating from idol worshipping foods might remain vegetarian.
 - All these are historically known issues.

If we take Romans 9-11, and 15 as a guide, and Romans 1, where the community and major issues were defined and fleshed out, we can see that the Roman Gentiles (who are the addressees) likely considered themselves to be “strong” since they were substantially free of the major food restrictions of Judaism.

- Gentiles. Probably had freedom in eating habits. Years without a Jewish community, likely years without the disciplines of kashrut, and of those who were observant.
- Jews, both believers, and either non-Messianics, or at least Jewish believers who were “zealous for Torah” were returning to Rome. The community was again integrated.
- Food issues were once again an issue.
 - The Roman Gentiles were warned against being arrogant towards the Jews. Arrogance and a perception of strength go hand in hand.
 - Observances also were an issue. It is likely that the Roman Gentiles did not observe the days that Judaism did. Feasts, fasts, and such. Maybe not even Purim, or the High Holy Days during these times.

Specific issues were wrapped around Jewish prohibitions (halackic, not Torah) such as wine and meat possibly sacrificed to idols. Perhaps there was an allusion to these issues. (vs 21) meat and wine were issues with regard to idol worship, pervasive in Rome.

The 'Weak' and the 'Strong'

A similar situation, also revolving around food, was addressed in a similar manner in Corinth. Here the issue was spelled out clearly.

(1Co 8:7-10) 7 However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. 8 But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. 9 But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. 10 For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols?

- The “weak” were former idol worshippers who stayed away from anything even faintly related to idol worship
- The “strong” were those who thought they could engage in idol worship since they apparently had such knowledge to know that idols were inanimate. This 'license' was having a profound impact on those who had come out of idol worship to the worship of the G-d of the universe.
- Paul rebukes the 'strong', not the 'weak' for their presumption, and selfishness.
- Paul's answer to the 'strong'

(1Co 10:12) 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.

(1Co 10:21) 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

In Corinth, Paul was using an ironic reversal to make his point. It was perhaps even sarcastic.

- Paul identifies himself as “weak

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(1Co 1:27) 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong,

(1Co 2:3) 3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,

- Paul calls those who are participating in forbidden things “strong”
- Paul rebukes these people who consider themselves knowledgeable and free
- He implies that they are foolish and infantile:

(1Co 2:14) 14 But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

(1Co 3:1) And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

- The point is that the “strong” were acting Darwinian, trampling on those who they should have been caring for.
- It is possible that the “weak” were really much stronger in their faith and walk, since they had a more sober and proper understanding of the dangers in the world.
- Perhaps the situation is similar in Romans. Those considered strong were not caring for others around them, and were causing trouble by taking unwarranted license in their personal habits and life. End of story: 1 Cor 10:14 Flee from Idolatry. 1 Cor 10:21-22

Romans 14 Continued

The World according to Rod:

The identities of the “weak” are not really important, as we are reduced to speculation anyway.

This is a midrash on Lev 19:14.

(Lev 19:14) You shall not curse a deaf man, nor place a stumbling block before the blind, but you shall revere your God; I am the LORD.

Jewish attitude towards those “weak” in Torah understanding was to be very accommodating: See Bava Metzia 75b for example

- The attitudes of “the strong” are really attitudes of people 'weak' in their faith.
- Paul is rebuking those who hold themselves to be “strong” in favor of those who he calls “weak”.
 - The “weak” follow restrictions, that maybe they need to remain in the faith. This is not inherent weakness, rather it is a sober assessment to remain away from that which makes one stumble.
 - The strong in other of Paul's writings are revealed to actually be weak.

It is possible that Paul is delivering a cleverly disguised rebuke, wrapped in honey for the Paul is teaching to not think selfishly, or too highly of our own practices. But rather to look out for the welfare of those in our community as much as possible.

We are not our own, and have a task that usurps petty squabbles.

In the end, we are here for a task, and now that Yeshua is revealed, we are to be wrapped up in His mission, His task, not being concerned for our own turf and desires.

Clean and unclean:

(Ro 14:14) I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

In one sense this is an echo, or perhaps a midrash on the teaching in Mark 7. Food that can be considered ritually unclean (either truly, or by rabbinic decree) does not touch the heart.

There are more than one type of 'defilement' the heart is much more serious than the uncleanness that results from food.

- Things in the natural world are not inherently evil, or good. Even pigs are not inherently evil, or unclean. Horses for example, can be used even though they are in the same category as pigs. Their proximity to a person does not cause him to be immoral.
- Paul answers this problem with the following instruction:

(Ro 14:19) 19 So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another.

- Our focus is on the building up of one another, not magnifying ourselves.

Romans 15:1-6

Actively strengthening the weak

This passage is an exposition on the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves.

- Paul does not mean “endure” but rather actively bear one another's burdens.
- Messiah came to serve, not be served, and we should emulate that attitude

- The Tanakh was written for our instruction, not meant to be disregarded.
- It perhaps is an admonishment to those who think they are strong, to not disregard Scriptural prohibitions in order to show off “freedom”

- The goal is to encourage, help each other to persevere.
- This will help us to glorify Hashem. Acceptance of one another is a goal.

Romans 15:7-12

- Messiah was a servant to Jews (the circumcision), so that they could become a servant to the Nations.
- The Nations will Glorify G-d.
- This is kind of a bookend. It reminds us of the theme that Paul was focused on in Romans.