

ENTRUSTED WITH THE ORACLES OF GOD ...

Rev. R. D. Anderson

Paul, writing to the church of God at Rome about the year AD 57, posed to them the question:

“If true circumcision is inward and a matter of the heart, not of the flesh, then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of (outward) circumcision?” (Rom. 2:28—3:1f).

Has Paul's response ever surprised you? Certainly it is not what everyone would expect! To the question what the benefit of circumcision is, Paul responds:

Great in every respect. First of all, that they (the Jews) were entrusted with the oracles of God.

This answer, however, is not as surprising as we might at first think. We need to cast our minds back to the original significance of circumcision. In Genesis 17 God gave to Abraham, the father of all believers, circumcision as a sign of the covenant that he made between himself and Abraham with his descendants. The almighty God came down and established a relationship between himself and the man of his choosing. Among the gracious promises given in this covenantal relationship was the fundamental promise to be God to Abraham and to his seed after him. Thus the covenant between God and his chosen people began and was sustained by God revealing himself to his people. God was not to be unknown (cf. Acts 17:23), but rather he took care to make known to them his will, his promises, his demands, his plan of salvation. No covenant relationship could exist without this gracious communication between God and his people. The God of heaven and earth thus entrusted to the Jews, and to them only, his divine oracles! Of all the nations on earth at the time, only the Jews had contact, communication, and much more than that, the grace of salvation from the creator of heaven and earth. We need to stop and reflect upon that, for it is a fact of immense importance, and a truth of the greatest significance. Yet just such a truth as this, we all too often skip over as “well known,” without considering its magnitude.

So it was that the first benefit of covenant membership was to be entrusted with the revelation (the oracles) of God. The Jews in the first century were well aware of this fact. They knew how privileged they were to be entrusted with the words of the one holy God. In fact they were especially conscious of this after the death of the last prophet Malachi, for it was well known that from that time, prophecy had ceased in Israel. Several passages from Jewish writings after Malachi make this very clear:

1 Macc. 9:27

And a great tribulation arose in Israēl, the like of which had not arisen since the day a prophet was not seen among them.

1 Macc. 4:44-46

And they consulted about what they should do with the profaned altar of burnt offerings; and good counsel befell them to destroy it lest it should be counted a reproach upon them since the Gentiles had polluted it; and they destroyed the altar and stored the stones on the mountain of the temple in a suitable place until a prophet should come to give answer concerning these things.

1 Macc. 14:41

... the Jews and the priests were pleased for Simon to be their leader and high priest forever - until a faithful prophet should arise.

Josephus (c. AD 37—c.110) *Against Apion* 1.29, 37-41

But that our forefathers took no less, not to say even greater, care than the nations I have mentioned in the keeping of their records—a task which they assigned to their chief priests and prophets—and that down to our own times these records have been, and if I may venture to say so, will continue to be, preserved with scrupulous accuracy, I will now endeavour briefly to demonstrate. ... It therefore naturally, or rather necessarily, follows (seeing that with us it is not open to everybody to write the records, and that there is no discrepancy in what is written; seeing that, on the contrary, the prophets alone had this privilege, obtaining their knowledge of the most remote and ancient history through the inspiration which they owed to God, and committing to writing a clear

account of the events of their own time just as they occurred)—it follows, I say, that we do not possess myriads of inconsistent books, conflicting with each other. Our books, those which are justly accredited, are but twentytwo, and contain the record of all time.

Of these, five are the books of Moses, comprising the laws and the traditional history from the birth of man down to the death of the lawgiver. This period falls only a little short of three thousand years. From the death of Moses until Artaxerxes, who succeeded Xerxes as king of Persia, the prophets subsequent to Moses wrote the history of the events of their own times in thirteen books. The remaining four books contain hymns to God and precepts for the conduct of human life.

From Artaxerxes to our own time the complete history has been written, but has not been deemed worthy of equal credit with the earlier records, because of the failure of the exact succession of the prophets. (Loeb translation)

All this had great implications for how the Jews treated the holy books of their Bible. Josephus records how:

It is an instinct with every Jew, from the day of his birth, to regard them [i.e. the holy books] as the decrees of God, to abide by them, and, if need be, cheerfully to die for them. (*Against Apion* 1.42)

The Pharisees, in order to maintain the holiness of the Scriptures, ruled that they were so holy that touching them made the hands unclean (i.e. in need of the washing of purification, cf. Mishnah, *Yad*.3:5; 4:6)! Further, amongst the detailed regulations for the sabbath, it was ruled that any one of the Holy Scriptures may be saved from burning on the sabbath, although one's house and all its contents, except sufficient food for 3 meals, was to be left to burn lest any "work" be done on that day! (cf. Mishnah, *Shab*.16:1).

In all this we see something of the great veneration that the Jews had for the oracles of God which had been entrusted to them. With this as background, we can all the more appreciate Paul's response to the question regarding the benefit of circumcision. But now we need to think a little further. For Paul in his letter to the Romans goes on to show how the covenant people of God are no longer the Jews as a national entity (who rejected the Messiah), but rather all those who have been grafted into the covenant line by following in the steps of the faith of father Abraham (Rom. 4:12, cf. 11:17ff). We, Gentiles, are now among the covenant people of God. God has given us baptism as the sign of the covenant relationship with him in place of circumcision (cf. Col. 2:11-12). It signifies our union with our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ (Rom. 6:3 ff.). Thus the revelation of God, his divine oracles, are now entrusted to us (cf. Rom. 15:4)—the church!

The great question therefore follows: Do we realise the immense privilege and responsibility that comes with this trust? The creator of heaven and earth has freely given to us his oracles to enable us to enjoy covenant communion with him, a communion through the salvation given us in his Son Jesus Christ. Is this so important for us that we too would cheerfully die for them? This is no flippant rhetorical question. We need seriously to examine ourselves and our attitudes to Holy Scripture. How do we treat our Bibles? More importantly, how do we treat the reading of God's Holy Word among us? The Jews of old were indeed *entrusted* with the oracles of God. They, however, became guilty of *distrust* in God by rejecting his Messiah, Jesus Christ. But God was yet *trustworthy*. These word plays are indeed made by Paul in the Greek of Romans 3:2-3. God still honours his promises for his true covenant people. Pray that we may carefully preserve, read, trust, and obey the Scriptures entrusted to us, lest we too should fall away in unbelief (distrust).