

A Prayer
of Jesus

I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will.

Chapter VI

DID PAUL TAMPER WITH GOD'S WORD?

Was Paul capable of misquoting scripture to sustain his positions? Was he honest in his use of the scriptures, or did he tamper with God's word? We must ask this question because it is evident from his letters that his opponents from among the disciples of Jesus specifically accused him of doing this very thing. This compelled him to respond by means of denial:

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God (II Corinthians 4:2).

Here, as in the case of the historical falsification of his erroneous doctrine of the imminent return of the Lord, we can with some ease show misquotes because we have the scriptures for comparison, just as we had history for comparison in the former case. But first it will be helpful to make a brief general survey of Paul's use of the scriptures.

Brief Survey

I acknowledge again that Paul never claimed the Law and the Prophets as a source of his gospel. To the contrary, he was very clear in stating precisely that his gospel was not received from man or through man (Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the apostles or any other disciple), but by a direct revelation of the risen Christ. He only believed that the Law and the Prophets bore witness to his gospel (Romans 3:21), and he was honestly expressing that view. But surely he was in error in believing the Law and the Prophets bore witness to it, in view of the texts he selected to support it. In far too many cases, the thought of the Law and the Prophets manifestly contradicted his gospel!

He was thoroughly familiar with the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament that was the primary scripture for the Greek speaking Jews in the First Century. This translation was prepared by a group of seventy Jewish scholars (hence the name) in the Second Century BC at Alexandria, Egypt. There can be no doubt that this was Paul's scripture, for it differs significantly from copies of the oldest Hebrew manuscripts and in his direct quotations he draws on the Septuagint rendition. Some of the differences in English versions of the New and Old Testaments, appearing in Paul's quotations of the Old, are the results of his use of the Septuagint.

Paul's references to the Old Testament appear predominately as either direct quotations or as allusions. In other cases, he utilizes expressions drawn from the Septuagint but that have no relationship with the contexts simply because of his familiarity with the texts and, like individual words, these expressions pop up as a means of expressing his ideas. When he quotes directly, he is likely to begin with the expression, "It is written," or some variation thereof. This manner of reference appears about thirty-two times in Romans, I and II Corinthians and Galatians. Altogether, he purports to quote from the Septuagint, sometimes designated as the Law and the Prophets, more than eighty times. There will not be agreement on the exact number because his

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quotations are very freely rendered, usually from memory as would be expected of one who was constantly on the move, without the convenience of a copy of the Septuagint always at hand. Holmes Rolston (Consider Paul, John Knox Press, 1951), has as good a study as can be expected from one of his Presbyterian bias, and he concludes:

- Paul quotes largely from memory and does not always quote accurately.
- Paul quotes at times without any regard to the context in which the passage is found in the Old Testament.
- Paul in a limited number of passages uses the language of the Old Testament to support ideas that are true, and are true to the thought of the Old Testament, but are not true to the meaning of the language in its original setting.

His first two findings and a portion of the third are concessions forced on him. All three are obvious to anyone who makes a serious and honest study of Paul and his use of the scriptures. Given these findings, the assertion contained within the third, that the ideas so supported are true and true to the thought of the Old Testament, is inevitably forced on him and on anyone who honors Paul as a true representative of Jesus. It is just another way of saying, "Well, so what if he does quote inaccurately, out of context and to support ideas not true to the original meaning of the quotations in their contexts? What he has said is nevertheless true!"

But it also follows that one cannot lean on Paul's use of the Old Testament in support of the conviction that what he wrote is true, or is true to the thought of the Old Testament. How can doctrine be true to the thought of the Old Testament when it is manifestly not true to the thought of the context containing the quotation used to support it? Surely, if an idea is true to the thought of the Old Testament, there must be contexts in which the idea is found in quotations that could be drawn to support the idea, and which are true to the meaning of the language in its original setting. Such quotations would be much more powerful in support of Paul's doctrine than the ones he used. Why didn't he find and use them? The defender of Paul is forced into unsavory options here, for either such quotations do not exist, or Paul was not aware of them for he surely would have used them in preference to the questionable ones that appear in his writings. In the first case, Rolston's contention that the ideas are true to the thought of the Old Testament is false. But in the case of the second option, that Paul was not aware of such quotations, we are forced to acknowledge two things most unsavory to Paul's defenders. First, Paul was not the expert on the scriptures that he is supported to be, and second and most devastating, his inspiration did not correct his inappropriate use of the scriptures.

Rolston seeks to sidestep this dilemma by suggesting that he (Paul) reads the deeper meaning of New Testament thought into the language of the Old Testament. "Cases in which his quotation is obviously inaccurate or his exegesis is not sound according to modern standards of exegesis, would fit into his own great assertion that the bearer of revelation must be understood as one who carries treasure in earthen vessels that the greatness of the power may be of God." Are we really to believe that quotations set forth inaccurately, or to support ideas not true to the setting of the quotation, only show that the greatness of the power is of God?

The above would be misleading unless I go on to state that Paul's use of the scriptures was often appropriate. An example of his appropriate use of scripture is his quotation of Isaiah 52:7 in Romans 10:15:

How beautiful the feet of those who preach good news.

He utilizes this consistent with Isaiah's prophecy to support the importance of preaching the gospel. In this case the reference is relatively trivial (as are numerous of his appropriate quotations and allusions), for it adds little to his position. Another example of appropriate use is his quotation of Leviticus 19:18 in Romans 13:8-10 and Galatians 5:14:

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You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

He uses it here properly to emphasize the great importance of the consideration of the needs of one's neighbor. (However, in both of these passages, his doctrine does not accord with that of Jesus.) But those cases in which he appears to have tampered with God's word are the most fundamental to his gospel. When he lays the groundwork for his gospel in Romans and Galatians he consistently abuses the Word of God so that one must concede that he does, indeed, tamper with God's word. What follows is perhaps the prime example.

Justification by Faith

Justification by faith only and apart from works of the law can be said to be a major theme of Paul's gospel. Indeed, I suppose this could be said to be his gospel, his good news, in a nutshell. After stating his case in Romans 3, he goes on in Chapter 4 to call forth the example of Abraham to cement his case. A similar argument is also presented in the Galatian letter. Focusing on the statement in Genesis 15:6, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (or justification), Paul proceeds to set forth the idea that this justification came to Abraham before he was circumcised, and therefore is independent of circumcision so that the uncircumcised Gentiles are as qualified to receive it as are the Jews. Then, secondly, that it is independent of the law or of works of the law. Abraham believed God and had faith in his promise, even in the knowledge of the barrenness of Sarah's womb and his own advanced age. As Paul explained,

No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (Rom. 4:20-22).

So it is on this basis that Paul seeks to establish Abraham as the prime example of justification by faith only, and not by works.

This, however, is not the entire story. If we examine the wider context of Genesis, we must conclude that Abraham's blessing came through both faith and works of law, and especially through the latter. God spoke to Abraham and said,

I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore. And your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies, and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice (Genesis 22:17,18).

No mention here of faith, only that Abraham obeyed the voice of the Lord – a work of obedience to law! Then, later, when God extended the same blessing to Isaac, it was because Abraham had

. . . obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws. (Genesis 26:5).

So that when Paul wrote,

The promise to Abraham and his descendants, that they should inherit the world, did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:13),

he chose to ignore the full explanation of the Genesis text. To cap it all off, nowhere in Genesis can I find that God promised Abraham that his descendants would inherit the world! He only promised them the Land of Canaan (Genesis 17:8).

The Epistle of James may have been written for the purpose, in part, of countering this "faith only"

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doctrine of Paul. James also appeals to Abraham, specifically to the offering of Isaac as sacrifice, and concludes,

Do you want to be shown, you foolish fellow, that faith apart from works is barren? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac upon the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness;" and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:20-24)

No, Not One!

Another glaring example of tampering with the word of God is to be found in the same context of Romans. Beginning with verse 1:18, Paul points out that all men are without excuse in failing to honor God and obey him, for God has through the creation shown himself to them. But they refused to honor God and instead turned to idols and all kinds of abominable practices. Therefore, Paul says, three times for emphasis, "God gave them up." He gave them up to dishonoring their bodies among themselves, to dishonorable passions and to a base mind and improper conduct. In Chapter 2, Paul asserts that the wrath of God is coming on these sons of disobedience, for he will render to every man according to his works.

There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek (2:9,10).

He then goes on (with asides to emphasize God's lack of partiality toward the Jew and the Greek) to show that on this basis all men, both Jews and Gentiles, are condemned, for

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23).

He advances a collection of six quotations from various contexts of the Old Testament to put this point, the universality of human sinfulness and depravity, to rest once for all. Let us list them all for closer examination, after which I will comment on each one briefly:

1. (3:10-12) None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one (Psalm 14:1-3).
2. (3:13a) Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive (Psalm 5:9).
3. (3:13b) The venom of asps is under their lips (Psalm 140:3).
4. (3:14) Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness (Psalm 10:7).
5. (3:15-17) Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know (Isaiah 59:7,8).
6. (3:18) There is no fear of God before their eyes (Psalm 36:1).

Psalm 14:1-3 appears on first reading to say exactly what Paul wishes it to say. But if we read the balance of the psalm, it becomes evident that the psalmist did not intend what Paul asserted, for in v. 4 we have the evildoers set apart from "my people" with a clear distinction made between them. Then in v. 5, these evildoers will be in great terror, for God will be with the generation of the righteous, who are then identified with the poor, but the Lord is his refuge. The Psalm closes with v. 7:

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O, that deliverance for Israel would come out of Zion! When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, Israel shall be glad.

Clearly, the Psalmist allows for two categories of human beings, the evildoers and the generation of the righteous, who are identified with Israel in the last verse. The "no, not one" must then refer only to the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord, presumably Gentiles in contrast to Jacob and Israel. Paul, who seeks by this to prove his point, that all are under condemnation of sin without exception, has not properly regarded the context and has as a result drawn something out of it contrary to the intent of the Psalmist. He has tampered with God's word.

Psalm 5:9, applied immediately after Psalm 14:1-3 surely confirms his point until we trouble ourselves again to read the entire psalm. On doing this, we discover that the point Paul is making is no part of the psalmists thinking. Verse 9 of the psalm is clearly spoken of the enemies of the psalmist, but then he moves immediately to speak of another category, those who take refuge in the Lord, who are the righteous. And then he closes with the words,

For thou dost bless the righteous, O Lord: thou dost cover him with favor as with a shield
(v. 12).

I remind you that the point Paul is making allows for only one category of human beings, wicked, sinful evildoers, but the psalmist clearly provides two categories. Yet again, Paul has not properly regarded the context and has drawn from it support for an idea contrary to what is there. He has tampered with God's word.

Then he moves on to Psalm 140:3 to further reinforce his point, that there is not a single human being who is righteous before God – no not one. From this psalm:

Deliver me, O Lord, from evil men, who plan evil things in their heart, and stir up wars continually. They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the poison of vipers (Psalm 140:1-3).

The venom of asps us under their lips! This really hardens their case – all human beings are venomous snakes, for there is none righteous, no not even one!

Again, let us read the psalm and see how this thinking accords with the thought of the psalmist. Is it true, in his mind, that there is only one category of human beings, the unrighteous? Not at all! Verse 3 only applies to those whom the psalmist sees as the wicked (v.8), and he moves quickly to the concluding verses and writes:

I know that the Lord maintains the cause of the afflicted, and executes justice for the needy. Surely the righteous shall give thanks to thy name; the upright shall dwell in thy presence (vs. 12,13).

Again, he readily supplies two categories of human beings, the righteous (v.13) and the wicked (v. 4). Yet Paul has again drawn from the psalmist a select few words that, when applied as Paul applies them, seems to reinforce the thought that there is only one category of human beings. He has tampered with God's word.

But as if venom under their lips were not strong enough language to use of all human beings, he presses on to yet another quotation from yet another psalm, this time Psalm 10:7, and asserts:

Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness

Now please remember, my reader, that this is applied to every human being! But do we not all know persons from whose mouths we have never heard such things? Surely our own personal observations are sufficient to falsify the posturing of the man from Tarsus. But again, how does

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this accord with the thought of the psalmist? From verse 7 he moves on to add,

. . . under his tongue are mischief and iniquity. He sits in ambush in the villages; in hiding places he murders the innocent (v.7, 8).

But how does he murder the innocent if there are no innocents, if every human being is wicked? Just as before, the psalmist has provided for two disparate categories of human beings in a clear contradiction of the point Paul is seeing to call him to witness to. Paul has tampered with God's word.

Do we begin to see a pattern here? Never mind; let us press on. Paul next calls the great and venerable prophet of God, the renowned Isaiah, to the dock to witness to the universal depravity of the human being. In this case, it is to assert that

. . . their feet are swift to shed blood, ruin and misery are in their paths and they know not the way of peace. (59:7,8).

Now, indeed, if we confine ourselves to Chapter 59 of this prophet (Deutero-Isaiah), We can almost see Paul's case being made. The prophet unleashes a diatribe against the evils of his countrymen that seems to leave no one out -- except himself! And one exception is all one needs to falsify Paul's assertion of absolute and universal depravity. Yet even in that single chapter of utter condemnation for his fellows, the prophet lets slip a single statement that, again, falsifies Paul's assertion even if we do not consider the exception afforded by the prophet himself. For in verse 15 we read:

. . . he who departs from evil makes himself a prey.

This obviously defines a category of human beings that depart from evil, and therefore are evil no longer, but instead are prey for the evil ones. But it is unnecessary to confine our quest for multiple categories of human beings to a single chapter. There is a wider context of several chapters that sprang from the same pen and person and we have to ask ourselves if the universality of human evil was a part of the thinking of the prophet who wrote these chapters. When we are dealing with the Psalms, we are uncertain what individual may have authored any one of them, and so we confine our context to that psalm, it being reasonable to suppose that each psalm represented the thought of a single person. But with Deutero-Isaiah we can widen the context, understanding that we are still being exposed to the thought of a single person. When we widen it only a little, to include Chapter 57, we immediately run into other categories than the sinful.

The righteous man perishes, and no one lays it to heart; devout men are taken away, while no one understands. For the righteous man is taken away from calamity, he enters into peace; they rest in their beds who walk in their uprightness.

So! The prophet has a thought for the righteous, as well as for the wicked, whom he brings forth again in the last verse of the chapter to testify of him:

There is no peace, says my God, for the wicked (v. 21).

Don't stop now. There is only one more in this collection of six quotations that Paul has mustered in defense of his conviction that there is not a single righteous person to be found. It would be surprising if he did not focus at some point on the ungodliness of this universally wicked species; that is, on its attitude toward the person of God. So, in Romans 3:18, he returns to a psalm to describe all human beings without exception:

There is no fear of God before their eyes (Psalm 36:1).

But does the psalmist intend to apply this to every human being? Certainly not, for if we move to

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v. 10 of the same psalm we find him saying:

O continue thy steadfast love to those who know thee, and thy salvation to the upright of heart!

Paul has tampered with God's word!

This is one of the fundamental premises of Paul's gospel, this assertion that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin. This applies to every single human being without exception. Now, when he goes to set this premise before others, such as in the present instance the church at Rome, he is compelled to seek support from the ancient scriptures, the word of God. If it were only Paul's word, there would be few converts, for he is only another human being, one of those who are, without exception, under the power of sin. So, by carefully selecting statements from six separate locations in the scriptures and combining them under the statement of his premise, he makes it appear that the Word of God strongly supports this view.

If we place ourselves in the position of the Roman disciples, most of whom are Gentiles with no strong familiarity with those scriptures, we will be inclined to believe that Paul's position is fully supported by the Word. Indeed, we don't have to place ourselves back with the Romans; we only need to recall how deceptively he has spoken to us as we have read this letter in quest of Truth, for we ourselves, many of us at least, were fully convinced. We probably were convinced without even checking out the references for ourselves, just because the sound of it seems fully supportive.

There is no denying it. Paul has here used the Word deceptively. He has tampered with it to make it appear that his position is supported thereby. Not only is this premise not supported by the passages quoted as its support, but neither is it true to the thought of the Old Testament, as Holmes Rolston would have us believe. The thought of the Old Testament, beginning with Cain and Abel, consistently allows for two categories of human beings, the wicked and the righteous, in the manner I have demonstrated above. If Paul's premise is true, it cannot be established by reference to the Law, the Prophets, or the Psalms. Now we know why his opponents charged him with tampering with the Word of God, and why he was compelled to issue denials in his defense.

Tampering with Habakkuk

We need to return now to Paul's doctrine of *justification by faith only* because there is another quotation from the Word that he draws on in its defense, in addition to the arguments centered on the person of Abraham. He has stated his most basic premise at the very outset of Romans. He writes:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live" (Romans 1:16,17).

This "it is written" seems to come from the Prophet Habakkuk, writing in Judah in the Seventh Century BC, but otherwise unknown in the scriptures. Paul is quoting him from the Septuagint. The quotation together with its immediate context as translated into English from the Greek of the Septuagint is as follows:

For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to its end -- it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith (Habakkuk 2: 3,4).

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We focus on the Hebrew word that is here translated "faith." In this context it is properly rendered as faithfulness, for it clearly refers to him whose soul is upright and does not fail during a prolonged period of waiting for the fulfillment of the prophets vision of a future deliverance from foreign conquests. Faithfulness, then, applies to the steadfastness of those who patiently wait, and who will in consequence be rewarded at the time of the vision's fulfillment. It does not mean "faith" as belief.

It is not surprising to see Paul applying this prophecy to the coming of the Christ (Messiah) in the work of Jesus. This is a common application, but he interprets the word for faithfulness as faith, applying it to the conviction of the truth of the redemptive work of Christ, which is not justified when its context is considered. The Septuagint similarly errs in using the Greek, *pistis*, to translate the Hebrew word, for this does mean faith, as Paul understood it. Since Paul was using the Septuagint, this may explain how he came to misunderstand the word in its context. And he made it the cornerstone of his gospel. So, it looks suspiciously like he has again been found tampering with God's Word. This is only one more of the numerous incidents where it can be shown that Paul used the Word deceptively.

The Curse

Another prominent feature of his gospel, related to the above postulate that all men are wicked without exception, is the idea of the curse of the law. Writing to the Galatian churches Paul asserted:

For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse, for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them" (Deuteronomy 27:26, Galatians 3:10).

Then he goes on to say:

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" (Deuteronomy 21:23) – that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Galatians 3:13-14).

But when we turn to examine the passage cited from Deuteronomy 27:26, we find a much different thought – indeed, a thought that is the opposite of what Paul is attempting to demonstrate. Rather than being under a curse by relying on the works of the law, Moses is establishing only that the curse comes from not doing *the words* of the law:

Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them (Deuteronomy 26:27).

In fact, Deuteronomy 28:1 pronounces a blessing on all who are careful to do all the commandments of the law. The emphasis on the blessing is clear, for it is extended to cover everyone in all circumstances:

Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body and the fruit of your ground and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

And on and on goes the text, defining the blessing on those who keep the law, who live by it and do it. It is only those who do not obey the voice of the Lord on whom the curses fall (Deuteronomy. 28:15f). In this text, the law is not a curse within itself, nor are all that rely on the

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works of the law under a curse. Rather, those who obey it are under a manifold blessing!

Is Obedience Possible?

Paul's defenders will object with the thought, also derived from Paul's description of his struggle with covetousness (Romans 7), that the law is of such a nature, and the human being is of such a nature, that it is not in practice possible for any one to obey it. But this will not do, for Paul himself has elsewhere assured us that, prior to becoming a disciple of Christ, he was, as to righteousness under the law, *blameless* (Philippians 3:6). So, I am forced to consider two options: either his gospel is here flawed by a radical contradiction within himself, or he has called on the word of God to support an idea that is the opposite of what the word of God in fact states.

There is more, for the Word goes on to assure us that the commandments of God are in fact *not too hard* to keep:

For the commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?" But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so *that you can do it.* (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).

Paul was very familiar with this passage. He must have mulled it over many times in efforts to decide what to do with it. What he finally did was modify it radically, as follows:

Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it. But the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, Who will ascend into heaven?" (that is, to bring Christ down) or "Who will descend in the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:5-9)

Rather than seek to buttress his argument by the quotation from the Law and the Prophets, because the contradiction was too great even for him, he chose to deliberately contrast his conception of the righteousness based on faith with that based on law according to Moses. And he did it in a very neat way, simply by taking the language of Moses and substituting "Christ" for "the commandment" and "the abyss" for "the sea." But by taking the very language of the law and making a parody of it to support an idea that is the direct opposite of the substance of the law – this is surely tampering with the Word of God.

He is seeking to have it both ways. He seeks to affirm his gospel by reference to the scriptures, convinced that the law and the prophets bear witness to it. (Romans 3:21) But where the contradiction is too clear, he does not hesitate to set it aside in favor of his own view, doing so in the language of the law that he has just supplanted, expecting in this way to yet capitalize on his familiarity with the scriptures. "Moses writes . . .," or so he begins, then the other shoe falls: "but". Moses writes one thing, but the righteousness based on faith says otherwise. Even though he promotes a doctrine that is the opposite of the teaching of the scripture to which he refers, his language yet sounds impressive and scriptural to his readers. They will not even notice that he has just discarded one of Moses cardinal tenets – that the *doing of the law is not too hard.* Instead of questioning him, his converts will be admiringly saying among themselves (as I once did), "That Brother Paul! What a master of the scriptures! He surely knows the Word of God!" If this isn't using God's Word deceptively, how is it possible?

Did Jesus become a Curse for Us?

Now, as to Jesus becoming a curse for us by hanging on a tree, yet again Paul comes forth with a supposed quotation from God's Word. Going back to the same context of Deuteronomy, only a few chapters earlier, he introduces the key text with his usual It is written:

Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree (Galatians 3:13).

This is very deceptive and misleading, for the actual language of the quotation is:

If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain upon the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is accursed by God; you shall not defile your land which the Lord your God gives you for an inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

Taken in context, the words do not say that every one who hangs on a tree is accursed, only those who have committed a corresponding crime. Paul probably means to imply that, although Jesus committed no crime, he nevertheless became a curse according to this passage because he took our crimes upon himself -- becoming a curse for us. But the statement with its context applies only to one guilty of a capital crime, not to everyone who hangs on a tree as Paul rendered the thought. Jesus was not guilty, and this mandate need not apply to him in any case, unless God chose to place a curse on him even though he was not guilty.

But why would God place a curse on an innocent man? Is it really so that He does not have to curse the guilty ones in whose stead the innocent man suffers? Under what compulsion is Almighty God that he must place a curse on anyone? Such an explanation ignores completely the emphasis of Jesus on God's infinite mercy, according to which he stands ready to forgive anyone whatsoever, contingent only on a valid repentance and subsequent mercy-driven life.

According to Paul in his use of this thought, any one who is hanged from a tree is accursed by God without consideration of guilt or innocence. Think of any of the many innocent people who have been hanged from a tree through the centuries. Are all accursed? Is the guilty party, who escaped punishment, totally free of consequences even if he has not repented, since some one has borne his penalty for him, has become a curse for him by hanging on a tree? No, this explanation will not do. Who is ready to believe the ridiculous – a just deity who curses every hanged man without regard to guilt, simply because he has been hanged on a tree?

The usual response of the churchmen to this is to assert that sin and evil is so serious a matter that it cannot be set aside without consequences. "Without shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin" (Hebrews 9:22). God's perfect justice is such that, when a sin is committed, without exception his wrath must be sated – if not on the guilty one, then on an innocent one who volunteers, out of love, to become the bearer of God's wrath – that is, on Jesus. Is God really this vengeful?

What do the rabbis say? Hyam Maccoby writes,

The idea that anyone hanged on a gibbet is under a curse was entirely alien to Pharisee thought, and the Pharisee teachers did not interpret the verse in Deuteronomy in this way. Many highly respected members of the Pharisee movement were crucified by the Romans, just like Jesus, and, far from being regarded as under a curse because of the manner of their death, they were regarded as martyrs. The idea that an innocent man would incur a curse from God just because he had been unfortunate enough to die an agonizing death on the cross was never part of Pharisee thinking, and only a deep contempt for the Judaism of the Pharisees has led so many scholars to assume that it was. The Pharisees never thought that God was either stupid or unjust, and he would

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have to be both to put a curse on an innocent victim (*The Mythmaker*, p 67).

Maccoby continues:

Even if the hanged person was guilty of a capital crime, he was not regarded as being under a curse, but, on the contrary, as having expiated his crime by undergoing execution. The verse in question was interpreted by the rabbis as follows: an executed criminal's corpse was to be suspended on a pole for a short period, but the corpse must then be taken down and not left to hang overnight, for to do this would incur a curse from God; in other words, the curse was placed not on the executed person, but on the people responsible for subjecting the corpse to indignity. One interpretation was: it is cursing God, or blasphemy, to allow the corpse of an executed criminal to hang, for the human body was made in the image of God. The New English Bible translates the verse, "When a man is convicted of a capital offense and is put to death, you shall hang him on a gibbet; but his body shall not remain on the gibbet overnight; you shall bury it on the same day, for a hanged man is offensive in the sight of God." This is in accord with the Pharisee interpretation of the passage, which was a correct reflection of the meaning of the original Hebrew (*The Mythmaker*, pp 67,68).

I conclude, therefore, in view of all this, that Paul's use of Deuteronomy 21:23 falls into the same category as the other examples listed above. Influenced by the faulty translation of the Septuagint and committed to a false premise, he has again, by mistaking the Word of God in its true meaning, been found to be tampering with the Word of God. Jesus was not placed under a curse due to his being hanged on the cross.

Offspring or Offsprings?

We must look again at Abraham as we turn now to investigate yet another instance of tampering. Immediately following the teaching on the curse, in the Galatian letter, Paul sets out, he says,

. . . to give a human example, brethren. No one annuls even a man's will, or adds to it, once it has been ratified. Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many; but referring to one, "And to your offspring," which is Christ (*Galatians* 3:15,16).

The Greek for offspring, or seed, that Paul would have been reading from the Septuagint is sperma, which, though singular in form as Paul states, is and was generally understood as a collective term, just as 'seed' in English is a collective. The Genesis context places it clearly in the collective use, with Isaac, then Jacob and the twelve patriarchs being the successive "seeds" to whom the promise of God to Abraham is rendered. But Paul apparently followed a rabbinical interpretation of the seed that emphasizes its singular aspect and makes it point only to the messiah. Thus, Paul sees it pointing only to Jesus Christ. He understands its collective impact but chooses here to ignore it for all possible recipients of the promise prior to Christ. But beginning with Christ, he includes all who, through faith in Christ, become identified with him, and returns to the collective use in *Galatians* 3:29:

And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring (seed), heirs according to the promise.

Christ is then the singular "seed" through whom the promise to Abraham, that all nations should be blessed in him, is fulfilled. The importance to Paul of this is that it permits the Abrahamic promise to completely transcend the law that, Paul says, came four hundred and thirty years later. The objection to this is that he is not consistent, because if we turn to his reference to this promised inheritance in *Romans* 9:4f, he clearly applies the promise to his kinsmen according to the flesh – the Israelites – saying,

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. . . to *them* belong the promises.

Then, in verse 7, he makes a point of quoting Genesis 21:12,

. . . through Isaac shall your descendants (seed, singular) be named.

Therefore in Romans he takes the view that seed is plural and includes Isaac. It does not, in this context, refer only to one, which is Christ. To be consistent, he needed to write to the Romans, "Through Christ shall your descendants be named." Apparently this, while serving his purpose in Galatians, does not do so in Romans. It most certainly would not have suited his purpose to write to the Galatians, as he did to the Romans, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." Do you see what he has done with this Genesis text? In both cases, he has in mind a doctrine that he wishes to support, but in one case the traditional interpretation does not fit. His solution? Give it a meaning consistent with his doctrine and the argument he is presenting, with no reference to the context, or to his prior contrary interpretations. Logically, it looks something like this:

In one case, $x = a$ (is singular)

In another case, $x = b$ (is plural)

But a is not equal to b (singular is not plural)

Therefore x is not equal to x !

I cannot avoid the firm conclusion: he has tampered with God's word. This is also another rampant case of faulty logic.

I emphasize again that Paul is not attempting to prove that the Law and the Prophets are the source of his Gospel. It is his position entirely that the source is not the Law and the Prophets, but the risen Christ who has delivered it to him in a trance, vision, dream, revelation, or whatever, as I stated above. It is nevertheless very important to him that the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it, which is what he is attempting to show with these quotations.

Let us suppose, to get a better comprehension of what is going on, that Paul has been charged with deception, arrested, and hailed into court for trial. (Indeed, this is what his opponents were doing: charging him with deception in his use of the scriptures.) The judge has seated himself, the court is called to order and is in session, and the prosecution, Paul's opponents, has presented its case. Now Paul, who serves as his own counsel, has taken the floor in his defense. He begins to call his witnesses, including Witness A, Mr. Genesis. A comes to the stand and Paul solicits his testimony, after which he proceeds to interpret it for the court:

Witness A's testimony = X.

Soon the day nears its end and the court recess until the next morning. Next morning Paul continues his defense by again calling Witness A, the same Mr. Genesis, to the stand for a second time. Witness A repeats precisely the same testimony as during the previous session, after which Paul thanks him and proceeds to interpret the testimony for the court. But this day,

Witness A's testimony = Y, And, Y is not equal to X

Evidently, Y is necessary to the support of the different point he is seeking to sustain on the second day. He is counting on the members of the court having very short memories or none, or else his memory is very short and he has forgotten what he argued on the previous day. In the real case before us, he has either forgotten, in this testimony to the Romans, that he has given a contradictory testimony years earlier to the Galatians, or he has changed his view, or else he assumes that the two versions will never be compared, as they are here.

Conclusion

The proceeding should be sufficient to establish that when Paul's opponents accused him of tampering with God's word, they did so with considerable justification.

I have not investigated all of his uses of the Old Testament, but I have looked only at the texts he brought forward to buttress his prime theses of justification by faith apart from works and the universal depravity of man. If these examples have not convinced you, my reader, of a lack of integrity in Paul's use of the scriptures, they should at least provide a basis for further questioning. The typical churchman will not be moved, however. He or she will simply respond with the conviction that Paul was fully justified in all this because he was writing under the direct revelation of the Holy Spirit and was only completing and/or correcting the incomplete revelations made to Moses and the Prophets.

Paul tampered with God's word? How can this be, seeing that whatever Paul wrote was and is God's word! Did he not himself make the claim that his words were really God's (or "the Lord's, I Thessalonians 2:13, I Corinthians 14:37)? Regarding those sharing this point of view, I can honestly say that my conscience is free. I have done my best to strip you of the church-applied shackles that bind your heart and soul, but if you persist in keeping your head immersed in the sand of Paul's baseless theological speculations, what more can I do?

I can do a great deal more. For one thing, I can provide additional support by demonstrating that Paul was capable of errors in logic. If his inspiration truly came from the Holy Spirit, if he wrote the Word of God in recording his epistles, he surely would not have written or said anything stupid – would he?