

Romans 14-15:6

From the book "Take Hold" by Ariel, and D'vorah Berkowitz

14:1-3 Now accept one who is weak in faith, but not for disputes over opinions. One man has faith to eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Don't let him who eats despise him who doesn't eat. Don't let him who doesn't eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him.

This will be the last passage which we will examine in Romans. At first glance, this section appears to be teaching that those believers who live by the Torah (in this context, those who live by the teachings on dietary laws) are nothing other than "weaker" brothers. The spiritually strong and mature, this interpretation goes, are the ones to whom food is not an issue. Carried one step further, the spiritually mature, therefore, leave the Torah behind and follow after Messiah according to the Spirit. They do not need the teachings of Moses any longer.

There is an excellent discussion of this passage in Peter Tomson's book, *Paul and the Jewish Law*. In essence, the problem here seems to be that people read the word "weak" and apply it to those believers who try to follow the Torah, such as celebrating the Mo'adim and eating kosher, etc. Tomson really helps us by drawing our attention to the nature of the Greek word translated "weak". Let us quote Tompson on the matter because his comments are extremely helpful. He says that here we have an instance when a knowledge of Jewish literature, especially that from the late Second Temple and mishnaic periods helps us to understand concepts from the writings of one who was thoroughly trained in rabbinics, Sha'ul of Tarsus. Regarding the Greek word "weak" *astheneis*, Tomson writes:

Not only was the Greek word *astheneis* among the relatively few words to be assimilated into Tannaic usage, but it was used specifically in matters of bodily constitution and diet. A mishna dating from the end of the 1st century CE at the latest, informs us of the following detail regarding the ritual bath the High Priest had to take in the early morning of Yom Kippur; "If the High Priest was aged or infirm, "*astneis*", they made hot water for him...."(m Yom 3:5). The word is more widely attested in later usage. In view of its context in Paul it is quite likely that for him the word had a similar specific connotation: "infirm, delicate," stressing a restrictive diet rather than a defective faith. We shall translate it here as "delicate".

Establishing the meaning of the word "weak" is only part of our task. We believe Tomson's analysis is correct and helpful. Now we have to establish who are those who have delicate needs. We think that the answer to that question lies in 14:1 where we read,

“....And the one who is delicate I the faith, receive; (but?) not for the purpose of discerning opinions” (my translation).

It seems clear both from this verse and from the rest of the passage that the person who has sensitive needs is not one who follows the Torah of God or any other part of God's Word; following God's Word is the standard for any believer. Rather, the one who has sensitive needs is the one who has certain convictions about disputable matters. The Torah is certainly not a disputable matter!

These verses instruct believers to relate to one another without passing judgment on each other's opinions, thereby invalidating each other. We can allow one another to have strong yet differing opinions.

People who have individually strong personal convictions about disputable matters are not weak ones in the faith. Rather they re to be regarded as people who have sensitive needs. What exactly are those needs? They need to be treated with respect and as individuals who are in process, attempting to think through the issues of their lives in accordance with where their faith is at any given time. Accordingly, others in the body am Messiah need to recognize each individual as precious to their Abba (Daddy) and to treat one another “delicately”—which is the author's way of exhorting each of us to be sensitive to one another. This really fits the context of Romans 14 and 15 where Sha'ul (Paul) is teaching the body of Messiah to learn how to be sensitive to one another, even though we differ from each other.

Romans 14 and 15 describes the right behavior in handling and individual who has strong convictions over a disputable matter. “Delicately” here refers to how the person should be handled while he still has such strong convictions on a matter on which the Scriptures are not clear and therefore where there is likely to be a difference of opinion among other believers. We are exhorted to be gracious to such a one. If his strong conviction is not causing any serious problems in the body, give that person space and allow God to move in his life as needed over time (verses 3-4). We should not that according to verses 5-6 believers have room for their own personal convictions that are important to us in our living out our faith. This is proper and good.