

33. Alpha Fights Back

Romans 3:20-24, 4:3 and Jacob 2:14-24

Before setting out to deliver to Jerusalem a donation from his churches, Paul wrote an epistle to Rome. It was not his church (he had never been there), but this was his way of summing up his theological convictions. Perhaps he had a sense (Luke in Acts says so) that he would not survive the Jerusalem visit, and that this would be his last chance to put his Gospel on record.

Paul's Gospel had come to center on the Atonement doctrine, the idea that the death of the innocent Jesus cancels out the sins of all. This idea he wrote into Romans, relying heavily on the example of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. In the last addition to his church newsletter, Jacob ridiculed Paul's analysis, and pointed out the centrality of good works. Jacob's response came later, but here for clarity are the two partisans, as though in dialogue:

Paul: Because by works of the Law shall no flesh be justified in his sight, for through the Law cometh the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law a righteousness of God hath been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe. For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, being justified by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Jacob: What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, Go in peace, be warmed and filled, without giving them the things needed for the body, what doth it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

Paul: For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness."

Jacob: 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 the scripture was fulfilled which said, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that man is justified by works, and not by faith alone.



Reflections

No one likes to think of controversy among the Christians. But there it is. It is a defining moment in the confrontation between Alpha and Beta, and the only one visible in the New Testament as we have it, without reconstructing the earlier states of some texts (Jacob *has* earlier states, but the conflict between Paul and Jacob is evident even if all of Jacob was written at one time).

Naturally, the conflict has been denied. Or it has been excused: Jacob did not understand Paul very well, or there was really no conflict between them. Thus argue the commentators. The commentators do not like discord.

On the contrary, Jacob understood Paul perfectly well. All these people lived at the same time, and they were in touch with each other, and they knew, all too clearly, what was going on.

We are not yet in the period of crisis between Judaism and nascent Christianity, which boiled up later in the century. It is only the year 57. But this confrontation within Christianity, between the older Alpha belief and the newer Beta theology, was serious. Despite well-intentioned attempts to paper it over, it eventually broke out again, at the worst possible moment.

With the writing of Romans, Paul's own letters cease. With his death, probably around the year 60, and with the death of Peter a few years later, the Apostolic Age came to an end, and the churches, and the factions within the movement, pondered what to do. One thing obviously requiring attention was to replace the Gospel of Mark, finished in 45 and now a generation out of date. The first to undertake this task was Luke, who admired Mark, but not the Atonement Doctrine which occurs in two passages in Mark. Those passages Luke eliminated. Most of the rest he kept, modifying some parts as he saw fit, and adding what he thought was most needed by the churches of the day.

This, he felt, was not more healing stories, but more Jesus teaching material.