

INTRODUCTION

Paul the Apostle, to the Beloved Gentiles in Rome

Paul is a man of enormous influence, a religious genius whose capacity for creative thought and original writing has made him a mountain on the landscape of Christian history. . . . The New Testament contains just one letter ascribed to James, two attributed to Peter, and three short ones attributed to John; but even taken all together their influence is far outweighed by just one of Paul's letters, written to the Christians in Rome.¹

David Horrell's description of the apostle Paul—"a mountain on the landscape of Christian history"—strikes me as exactly the kind of thing we must say about the man from Tarsus. One can hardly imagine what would remain of the rich and multilayered heritage of Christian theology and ethics if we sought to strip it of all traces of Pauline influence. Certainly the stream of Christian tradition begins with Jesus of Nazareth. But that stream's disposition and description at present are, in large measure, the product of Paul's influence. And, of course, readers throughout history have often landed on Paul's epistle to the Christians in Rome as his seminal and most influential letter. This introductory discussion briefly sets out some basic presuppositions about Paul and his letter that will guide our reading of Romans.

1. Horrell, *Introduction*, 1.

The Story of Pauline Theology

In this book, we will locate Paul's thinking within the world circumscribed by Israelite biblical tradition. The stories of Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses and the wilderness, Israel and the covenant did not provide proof-texts or examples or prefigurations of Paul's gospel; they did not provide a resource that Paul "used" to help communicate his message.² Rather, these stories provide "the symbolic universe within which Paul lives, within which he is rooted in his thought and life before as well as after his call."³ In what follows, I will outline the basically *storied* basis of Pauline thought and theology. In other words, this section will briefly describe the underlying narrative—the *story*—that informs Paul's thinking.⁴

That story begins "with God's act of creation, closely followed by the fall of Adam."⁵ Very quickly humanity fails at its vocation as "the image of God" amidst creation, resulting in a rupture between God, as Creator, and humanity, as creation. The first move toward healing that rupture occurs in the story of Abra[ha]m: God calls Abraham out of his land and promises him:

2 I will make you a great nation [LXX: *ethnos mega*], and I will bless you and magnify your name. And you will be blessed. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and those who curse you I will curse. And in you all the tribes of the earth [LXX: *pasai hai phylai tēs gēs*] will be blessed. (Gen 12:2–3 LXX⁶)

Abraham received these promises—and others as well—by *faith* (see Gen 15:6) and responded in *trust* that God could and would provide what he had promised. Eventually, God would bring Abraham's descendants out of slavery in Egypt and establish them as his people, making a covenant with them. We call that covenant "the Torah [*nomos*] of Moses." God promised life and blessing to those who kept the terms of the covenant (see Deuteronomy 30). To understand Paul, however, we must remember the original promise to Abraham in Genesis 12: God promised to bless Abraham and

2. See Ehrensperger, "Scriptural Reasoning."

3. Ibid.

4. See Grieb, *Story*; Gombis, *Paul*, chap. 3.

5. Horrell, *Introduction*, 58.

6. All translations of the Septuagint are my own. I generally cite the LXX because, as far as we can tell, it looks like Paul read the Bible in its Greek translation. At the very least, Paul typically cites the Hebrew Bible in its Greek form; but see the table in Silva, "Old Testament in Paul," 630–31.

his descendants, and through them to bless “all the tribes of the earth.” Paul understood Torah in light of this promise.

At the height of its geo-political influence, YHWH promised Israel’s king, a shepherd named David, that he, YHWH, would establish an eternal Davidic dynasty. Centuries earlier, when the Lord commissioned Moses on Mount Sinai to return to Egypt and bring the people out of slavery, the Lord called Israel his “son”: “But you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘This is what the Lord says: “Israel is my first-born son”’” (Exod 4:22 LXX). In David’s day, YHWH promises the expansionist king,

12 And it shall be when all your days are fulfilled and you go to sleep with your fathers, that I shall raise up your seed after you—who shall come from your loins—and I shall prepare his kingdom. 13 He will build for me a house for my name, and I shall establish his throne forever. 14 *I shall be like a father to him, and he shall be like a son to me.* If his unrighteousness comes, then I will reprove him with the rod of men and with the ropes of the sons of men. 15 But I will never remove my mercy from him, the way I removed it from those whom I removed from my presence. 16 And his house and his kingdom shall be made trustworthy before me forever, and his throne shall be established forever. (2 Kgdms 7:12–16 LXX; my emphasis)⁷

Eventually, however, the people of Israel would incur the punishments and curses established by their covenant with YHWH (*viz.* exile and death). We typically understand this failure in terms of the nation’s “sin”; that is, the people of Israel worshipped the gods of other nations, they oppressed the poor (widows, orphans, and aliens), and so on. But in addition to their sin, Israel failed to be the blessing that God originally promised to Abraham. If nothing else, the nations around Israel were confirmed in their idolatry because of the apparent strength of their gods *vis-à-vis* Israel and YHWH (see Isa 52:5; Ezek 36:22–23). Israel’s faithfulness to the covenant would have put YHWH’s glory and faithfulness on display for all the nations to see. But her sin obscured the glory of the Lord and blocked the Abrahamic promises.

Despite the people’s spectacular failure and rebellion against YHWH, the Lord reiterated his own faithfulness to his promises to Abraham and his covenant with Israel. Two examples will suffice. First, YHWH promises the people of Israel and of Judah through the prophet Jeremiah:

7. Similarly, see Ps 2:7 LXX.

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31 “Behold! The days are coming,” says the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant [*diathēkēn kainēn*] with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers on that day when my hand grasped them to lead them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not abide in my covenant, and I turned away from them,” says the Lord. 33 “For this covenant, which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” says the Lord, “I will undoubtedly give my *nomoi* upon their mind, and upon their hearts I will write them. I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Jer 38:31–33 LXX)⁸

Jeremiah 38 affirms both (i) that the people did not abide in the covenant God had made with the people, and (ii) that the Lord will nevertheless establish a new covenant with his people—with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Paul takes up these ideas in very telling ways in 2 Corinthians, where he speaks of himself and his companions as “ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of s/Spirit” [*diakonous kainēs diathēkēs, ou grammatos alla pneumatos* (2 Cor 3:6)]. He then goes on to speak of the comparative glory of the old and new covenants and the persisting veil over Israel “at the reading of the old covenant” [*epi tē anagnōsei tēs diathēkēs* (3:14)]. Jeremiah insists that God does not abandon his promises even when his people have abandoned him. Paul makes the same point using similar language.

As a second example, when the Lord re-establishes his covenant with his people, it will bring the fulfillment of God’s original promise to Abraham, that all the tribes of the earth will be blessed. Isaiah is particularly emphatic in this regard. For instance,

5 And now, thus says the Lord who fashioned me from the womb to be his very own slave [*doulon heautō*], in order to gather Jacob and Israel to himself—I will be gathered and glorified before the Lord, and my God will be my strength— 6 and he said to

8. I left *nomoi* (“laws”) untranslated because, in context, the prophet has more in mind than is conveyed by the English word “laws.” The Greek translates the Hebrew word *tōrā*, which encompasses a number of meanings, including “law,” “teaching,” “instruction,” and so on. When I do translate *nomos*, I will prefer “Torah” over “Law” or, worse, “law.” Mark Nanos helpfully explains the wider significance of *tōrā*: “‘Torah’ is a Hebrew word that denotes ‘teaching’ rather than simply ‘law,’ including laws/commandments but also many other teachings, stories, warnings, consolation, etc. For Paul, ‘Torah’ is not the opposite of ‘love’ or ‘freedom’ but embodies ‘teaching’ about important values, including ‘commandments’ that clarify how those whom God has ‘freed’ from Egypt, from sin, and so on, are to treat (‘love’) others” (Nanos, “To the Churches,” 12 n.2).

me, “It is a great thing for you to be called my child, so that you may make the tribes of Jacob stand and return the dispersion of Israel. Behold, I have set you as a covenantal race [*eis diathēkēn genous*], as a light for the nations [*eis phōs ethnōn*] so that you might be for salvation as far as the end of the earth [*eis sōtērian heōs eschatou tēs gēs*].” (Isa 49:5–6 LXX)

Paul does not cite Isa 49:5–6 in any of his extant writings.⁹ However, as Luke portrays Paul responding to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch, he cites Isa 49:6. Scholars have expressed the need for caution in appealing to Luke’s portrayal of Paul in order to reconstruct Paul’s own theological persona.¹⁰ Even so, this idea fits so squarely with Paul’s self-presentation at key points (esp. Gal 2:8; Rom 11:13; see also Paul’s references to “light” [*phōs*] in Romans and elsewhere) that Luke has certainly captured something of the historical Paul.

If it is appropriate for us to appeal to Isa 49:5–6 in our attempt to recover the foundational, scriptural narrative that undergirded Paul’s theologizing, I find it striking that this passage closely aligns the restoration of the scattered tribes of Israel with the redemption of the nations (or gentiles).¹¹ In some strands of Jewish thought (e.g., in many of the Dead Sea Scrolls), the restoration of Israel would take place when YHWH vindicated his people and defeated their enemies. And certainly we can find similar sentiments in the Hebrew Bible. But here in Isaiah 49 and throughout Isaiah as a whole, when Israel is brought back into her covenant with God, the nations will join with Israel and offer their worship to the Creator God. In this vision of the world, the nations are blessed rather than crushed when YHWH restores his people Israel.

This narrative—the [hi]story of God’s relationship with Abraham and his descendants—finds its climax in the life, death, and resurrection of a craftsman from Nazareth, Yeshu’a bar Yosef. While Paul originally opposed Jesus and his followers, his encounter with the risen Jesus convinced him that God had indeed chosen Jesus to bring his promises to fulfillment. More than that, God had shown Paul mercy and grace, making Paul his slave [*doulos*]¹² and sending him across the eastern Mediterranean basin

9. He does, however, cite Isaiah 49 in two places (see 2 Cor 6:2 [Isa 49:8]; Rom 14:11 [Isa 49:18]). And, of course, Paul frequently cites or alludes to Isaiah as a whole.

10. Recently, see Eisenbaum, *Paul*, 11–16.

11. But see Das, *Paul*, 120–28, esp. pp. 120–23, who cites Donaldson, “Curse of the Law.”

12. See Rom 1:1, *passim*; recall Isa 49:5 LXX.

proclaiming the gospel. His message centered on Israel's Messiah (Jesus), the restoration of God's people (Israel), and the invitation to the nations to acknowledge YHWH as their true God. As Paul prepared to deliver a collection he had coordinated and taken up from the churches in Asia Minor and southeastern Europe for the church in Jerusalem, he apparently considered his task in the east finished. And so he turned his eyes west and envisioned a mission to Spain, the edge of the then-known world. At some point, as he made plans to return to Jerusalem and then to head west toward Rome, he wrote what would become one of the most influential letters in history: his epistle to the Christians in Rome.

Two Other Questions

Romans suffers a perplexing irony. On the one hand, some of this letter's introductory issues are rather non-controversial. For example, our letter's *who* (i.e., *who* wrote Romans?) enjoys almost total consensus. If Paul did not write Romans, he did not write any of the letters that bear his name.¹³ Similarly, we are relatively certain about the *when* and *where* of Romans' authorship as well as the letter's *what* (i.e., its literary integrity).¹⁴ On the other hand, other introductory issues are subject to considerable debate, so much so that scholars frequently refer to these issues as "the Romans debate."¹⁵ As a result, we are simultaneously more certain and more uncertain about Romans than about the other letters in the Pauline corpus. The

13. Longenecker, after chronicling eighteenth- and nineteenth-century attempts to disprove Romans as a Pauline letter, rightly says, "Scholars today, however, are united in recognizing Romans as having been written by Paul. And all earlier denials of his authorship are commonly viewed today as aberrations in the history of NT study, and rightly so" (Longenecker, *Introducing*, 5).

14. The textual history of Paul's letter to the Romans is among the most complicated of all the NT texts. Put simply, we have evidence of fourteen-, fifteen-, and sixteen-chapter versions of the letter, and both the grace-formulae at 16:20, 24 and the doxology at 16:25–27 appear in various places or not at all in different manuscripts (see the discussion of Romans 16, below). Nevertheless, in comparison with 2 Corinthians or Philippians, the integrity of the bulk of Romans is relatively established.

15. Das describes Romans scholarship as a "furious debate [that] has raged in Pauline scholarship for the last forty years over the occasion behind the Letter to the Romans. Paul's letters generally address specific issues facing local congregations. The apostle confronted Jewish Christian teachers at Galatia. He comforted the Thessalonians when members of their congregation died shortly after his departure. He combated division at Corinth. . . . When scholars turned their attention to Romans, the situation presupposed in this letter proved more elusive" (Das, *Solving*, 1). See also Donfried, *Romans Debate*.

remainder of this chapter briefly considers two final questions: *for* (or *to*) *whom* did Paul write Romans? and *why* did he write this letter?

The Recipients of Romans

The *who*, *where*, and *when* of Romans are relatively straightforward: Paul of Tarsus, at Corinth, in 57 CE, respectively. Things get significantly more complicated when we turn to Romans' *to whom*. Granted that Paul addressed his letter "to all those in Rome who are beloved of God [and] called saints" (1:6), the question remains: Did Paul envision his readers as primarily Jewish, gentile, or as some combination of the two?

Commentators typically understand Romans' original audience, insofar as Paul imagined it,¹⁶ as a mixed congregation of both Jewish and gentile believers in Jesus (or, alternatively, as a number of congregations, some Jewish and some gentile). For example: "The most important background information for reading Paul's letter is that these Roman house churches were probably composed of both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians."¹⁷ Similarly, Richard Longenecker concludes,

Undoubtedly the life of Jews in Rome after Claudius's edict was severely restricted, particularly with the loss of their right to free assembly in their synagogue groupings. *But we need not insist that a Jewish component was no longer part of the Christian presence at Rome.* Likewise, it may be posited that Jewish believers in Jesus continued to live in the city and had some influence within the developing Roman church, whatever is postulated regarding their numbers compared to those of Gentile believers within the Roman Christian community.¹⁸

Longenecker certainly speaks with the majority of commentators. However, in the last few decades a relatively small but important minority of scholars has argued that Paul wrote Romans for an exclusively gentile audience. One of the stronger voices here belongs to Stanley Stowers, who

16. This is an important distinction. There is a real difference between the actual audience who first read Romans (or who first *heard* Romans being read), on the one hand, and the audience that Paul had in mind as he dictated the letter. Whether or not there were Jewish Christians in Rome, our question asks whether Paul *imagined* Jewish Christians as recipients of his letter.

17. Grieb, *Story*, 5.

18. Longenecker, *Introducing*, 80 (my emphasis); for a discussion of the history of Judaism in Rome, see Das, *Paul*, 50–61.

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is almost polemical in his critique of the view that Paul wrote for a mixed audience.

The assumption of a Jewish Christian element in the audience forms another pillar in the traditional reading of Romans and of Paul's letters in general. The obsession with finding Jewish readers is so great that interpreters ignore or disallow the letters' explicitly encoded audience. Although the text explicitly addresses itself only to gentiles and nowhere explicitly encodes a Jewish audience, interpreters persistently speak of the predominantly gentile audience and the gentile majority. The logic of this nearly willful dismissal of Paul's encoded audience goes something like this: Because we know that there were Jewish believers in Rome and because Paul's subject matter at times seems fit for Jews, there must have been a Jewish Christian element in the audience in Paul's mind as he wrote.¹⁹

In other words, contemporary readers insist on reading Paul's letters—especially Romans—as though they were written to groups of Christians comprising both gentile and Jewish believers, *even though Paul himself addresses his letters to exclusively gentile believers in Jesus*.²⁰

Andrew Das argues that Paul explicitly identifies his readers as gentiles when he speaks of having received grace and apostleship “for the obedience of faith among all the gentiles [*en pasin tois ethnesin*] for his name's sake, among whom you also are [*en hois este kai hymeis*], [you who are] called by Jesus Christ” (Rom 1:5–6).²¹ This, in fact, explains why Paul took it upon himself to write to the Roman Christians in the first place: even though he had not founded the Roman church and indeed had never even visited them, Paul was appointed “the apostle to the gentiles.” Therefore,

19. Stowers, *Rereading*, 29–30.

20. Francis Watson complains, “It is often *wrongly assumed* that Paul addresses Romans exclusively to Gentiles—*on the basis of a misinterpretation of 11:13*, where ‘I am speaking to you Gentiles’ refers only to the immediate context and not to the letter as a whole” (Watson, “Law in Romans,” 105). How ironic, then, that Watson's essay comes bound in the very same volume as Das's essay, “The Gentile-Encoded Audience of Romans,” which argues—*not assumes!*—on the basis of a “consistent and conspicuous” identification of Paul's audience in four—*not one!*—passages: Rom 1:5–6; 1:13; 11:13; 15:15–16 (Das, “Gentile-Encoded Audience,” 33). Moreover, Das's argument in this essay was not new; see Das, *Solving*, which was published *five years* before Watson's dismissive characterization!

21. Even if there were Jewish believers in Jesus in Rome, and even if Paul assumed that some of them would have eventually heard or read his letter, Das's thesis is simply that nothing in Romans suggests that Paul had these Jewish believers in mind as he wrote. See also Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 87 n.2; 99–100.

the gentile Christians in Rome fell “within the sphere of Paul’s apostolic authority because they too are gentiles.”²²

Das finds corroborating evidence for his conclusion in Rom 1:13–15, where Paul says he wants to bear fruit “among you, also, just as among the rest of the gentiles [*en tois loipois ethnesin*], Greeks as well as barbarians, wise as well as foolish.” In the letter’s closing, Paul clearly indicates that the sphere in which he exercised his apostolic authority was “among the gentiles” [*eis ta ethnē* (15:16)], and that he endeavored to bring “the offering of the gentiles” [*hē prosphora tōn ethnōn* (15:16)] as an acceptable and sanctified gift to Israel’s God. Paul also refers to the “obedience of the gentiles” [*hypakoēn ethnōn* (15:18)], which again suggests that Paul conceived his apostolic task in gentile—and even *exclusively* gentile—terms.²³ Thorsteinsson, in a provocative statement, is even more sure of a gentile audience for Romans than for any other Pauline letter: “[I]n no other extant letter by Paul is the audience so distinctly identified as in Romans.”²⁴

This is not the place to answer the objections to a thoroughly gentile audience for Romans. However, we should recognize the speculative (rather than textual) tenor of most discussions of Romans’ supposedly mixed audience. As one example, which is neither uncharacteristic nor unusual:

Originally, the Roman Christian churches had been populated by Jewish Christians, but after the expulsion of the Jews, including Jewish Christians, the Christian churches *must have continued* under Gentile Christian leadership. In the meantime, these churches *had become disconnected* from the Jewish synagogues, and *other factors had probably shifted*. Some of the communities *may have switched* to Sunday worship or *discontinued* the dietary regulations prescribed by Torah. . . . At Claudius’s death, Jews—including Jewish Christians—*probably returned* to Rome in great numbers, and suddenly the Roman house churches *must have experienced* a merger of two rather different groups

22. Das, *Solving*, 55. See Das’s earlier discussion in *Paul*, 63–69.

23. See Das’s larger discussion (*Solving*, 54–70). Thorsteinsson also provides an extensive discussion of Paul’s audience, arguing that Paul’s readers “are included among the people to whom Paul was appointed apostle, namely, non-Jews. In other words, the rather general identification of the letter’s recipients in the address has already been demarcated by Paul’s introductory account of his mission to ‘all the gentiles’ (vv. 5–6). Hence, the letter is addressed to all those gentiles in Rome who stand in a loving relationship to God” (see Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 87–122; p. 87 quoted).

24. Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 88.

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who had been divided for five years and were now learning to live together.²⁵

Even if we grant every facet of this reconstruction of the Roman church, the fact remains that Paul only ever explicitly identifies the audience he imagines himself addressing as gentiles.²⁶ Moreover, most of the details of this reconstruction have very little concrete evidence supporting them; the italicized phrases highlight those parts of Grieb's reconstruction that (i) are central to the traditional understanding of the context of Paul's audience and (ii) rely completely on historians' assumptions about what "must have," "may have," and "probably" happened. But *why* should we assume that gentiles who took an interest in Jesus, *as Israel's Messiah* (!), "had become disconnected from the Jewish synagogues" or formed a "rather different group" than Jews who also identified Jesus as the Messiah? No answer is immediately forthcoming. As we work through the text of the letter, then, we will defend the thesis of Paul's gentile-Christian audience.²⁷

The Purpose of Romans

If Paul wrote for gentile Christ-believers in Rome (Romans' *to whom*), *why* did Paul write this letter? Here are three of the more compelling reasons scholars propose for Romans.

1. Das makes a compelling case that Paul writes Romans to exercise his authority as the apostle to the gentiles.²⁸ Paul did not found the

25. Grieb, *Story*, 7; my emphases.

26. See Rom 1:5–6, 13; 11:13; 15:15–16. The one possible exception is Rom 2:17 ("But if you call yourself a Jew . . ."), though, as we will see below, even here Paul is imagining himself addressing *a gentile* who "call[s him]self a Jew." Paul's "for the Jew first as well as for the Greek" formulae (Rom 1:16; 2:9, 10; see also 3:9, 29; 9:24; 10:12) do not explicitly identify his intended audience.

27. I retain the use of the traditional term, *Christian*, throughout this book despite the fact that Paul nowhere uses the term. Joshua Garroway (*Gentile-Jews*, 4–7) argues that this word is anachronistic, and of course it is. But his own proposal, that we refer to them as "Gentile-Jews," is no more consonant with Pauline usage than the traditional designation. However, I agree with the substance of his argument (that "Gentile-Christians of the first century should in fact be considered Jews"; p. 1), and so I stipulate that my use of the term *Christian* assumes a fundamentally ("according to the flesh") Abrahamic understanding of the term, which understanding usually applies only (or primarily) to the label, *Jew*.

28. Das, *Solving*, 56–57; *passim*.

church(es) in Rome; neither had he ever visited them, though he says he intended to. Paul understands himself, however, as one commissioned to take the message of the gospel to the gentiles (see Gal 1:1, 16), and even the Jerusalem church had recognized this commission (Gal 2:1–10, esp. v. 9). Paul's letter, therefore, spreads the umbrella of Paul's apostolic authority over the community/-ies of gentile believers in Rome.

2. Similarly, Paul mentions his intention to launch a preaching mission west, through Rome and on to Spain. By the time he wrote Romans, Paul has been engaged in preaching the gospel throughout the eastern Mediterranean for nearly two and a half decades. Now he plans to travel to Rome, and he hopes they will send him out west (Rom 15:22–24). But before he can do that, he has to take the offering he has collected from the gentile congregations in southeastern Europe and Asia Minor and deliver it to the Jewish congregation(s) in Judea and Jerusalem.
3. The lengthy discussion of Israel in Romans 9–11 suggests that Romans' original audience exhibited some animosity toward Israel and/or Jewish brothers and sisters (= believers). In Romans 14–15, Paul addresses a schism within or among the Roman churches and provides a lengthy admonition for the “strong” and the “weak” brethren to accept one another. Since most commentators interpret Romans in light of a mixed audience that comprises both Jews and gentiles, we usually imagine a division between the Jewish and gentile believers in Rome. If, however, Paul is addressing an exclusively gentile audience, then we will have to re-think this interpretation of Romans 14–15.

We could mention other purposes, but these three seem to be the primary and the most significant proposals frequently made by Pauline scholars.²⁹

Thus, Paul writes to the gentile believers in Rome in order (i) to extend his apostolic authority over the established communities of gentile believers and place his gospel at the center of their theological perspective; (ii) to lay the foundation for a mission to Spain, on the western edge of the Empire; and (iii) to manage (≠ solve!) tensions between various expressions of the nascent Christian faith and restore unity between them without requiring conformity to a single pattern of faith or piety.

29. See Longenecker's chapter, titled simply, “Purpose” (*Introducing*, 92–166). The three purposes I have singled out pertain to Longenecker's first, second, and fourth options (Longenecker mentions five possible purposes for Romans).