

Paul’s Epistle to the Romans as a Theological Re-Reading of His Epistle to the Galatians*

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Among biblical scholars, it is considered one of the greatest challenges, to set about writing a commentary to Paul’s epistle to the Romans. Accordingly, it is considered one of the greatest achievements to successfully complete this commentary. This raises the question of what is it that makes writing a commentary to this epistle so exceptional? The answer is not difficult: This is, of course, nothing other than the exceptional character of this epistle itself. Within the Protestant tradition its high esteem originates from the judgment of the reformers of the 16th century. Martin Luther, for example, has tagged this letter as a “brief summary of the entire Christian and evangelical doctrine,”¹ and Philipp Melanchthon has labelled it a “compendium of Christian doctrine.”²

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¹ *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Die Deutsche Bibel VII* (Weimar: Böhlau, 1931), 27.22–23.

² Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci communes 1521. Lateinisch-Deutsch*, translated by Horst-Georg Pöhlmann (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, ²1997), 24.

Contrary to this, in the recent past, it has been emphasised repeatedly that Romans is not “a doctrinal treatise” or an “abstract theological document” but a “situational” or “profoundly occasional letter.”³

However, this is hardly an appropriate alternative. It is not particularly risky to claim that there is not one single theological treatise that was not occasioned by and written in a particular historical situation. And the reverse is true as well: It would be foolish to exclude the possibility that even in situational and occasional letters a universally valid truth can be found that transcends the historical situation in which the letter was written.

That we have to grant this claim also to Romans is suggested by several historical and literary features that give this letter a unique character among Paul’ epistles.

THE UNIQUENESS OF ROMANS AMONG PAUL’S EPISTLES

There are three features that constitute the uniqueness of Romans: First, Romans is the only one of Paul’s congregational letters that was not written to a congregation that had been founded by his own missionary preaching. Unlike the other letters, Paul is writing to people with whom he has no common experience to remind them of. This is not contradicted by the fact that, at the end of his letter, Paul sends greetings to many people he knows by name (Rom 16:3–15). Rather, it has been made plausible that these greetings are intended to reduce the distance between the author of the letter and its addressees. They act as kind of bridgeheads in foreign and unfamiliar territory. In addition, Paul nowhere in his letter refers to news that would have given him information about the situation in Rome. Also, texts like Rom 1:8; 6:17–18; 15:14; 16:19 don’t provide any information about the situation in Rome, because they are rhetorical *topoi* that act as *captationes benevolentiae*. To

³ Robert Jewett, “Following the Argument of Romans,” in Karl Paul Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 265–277 (265); idem, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 46.

this corresponds that Paul not only in the exordium of his letter (Rom 1:8–17) but also in Rom 15:14–32, the corresponding section at the end of the letter, does not say any word about the situation in Rome, but only ever talks about himself and his own present situation.

The second feature that constitutes the uniqueness of Romans is the so-called “dual character” of this letter.⁴

On the one hand, it is the Gentile Christians of Rome whom Paul determines to be his addressees. Whenever he addresses his readers directly, he always addresses them as Gentiles. Throughout the entire letter this orientation is never abandoned, although Paul very well knew that there were also Jews among the Roman Christians. He even mentions some of them by name.⁵

On the other hand, it is non-Christian Judaism that comes into focus again and again. Either Paul grapples with Israel’s self-understanding as God’s chosen people (1:18–5:21; 7:1–25; 13:8–10), or he debates the problem and the consequences of Israel’s rejection of the Gospel (Rom 9–11). All this results in the peculiar situation that Paul is writing to Gentile Christians, but in doing so, he is largely conducting a dialogue with non-Christian Judaism. However, no one can have a dialogue with “Judaism” as such. “Judaism” as such has no eyes to read and no ears to hear. A dialogue like this one always requires someone who acts as an implicit representative of its counterpart. Because there are no addressees outside the text apart from its gentile-Christian addressees, to whom the dialogue is merely presented, this dialogue partner cannot be anyone else than Paul himself—or, to put it more precisely—Paul the Jew. Being compelled by him, Paul the Apostle gives account of the gospel which he proclaims as “a servant of Christ Jesus, set apart for the gospel of God” (Rom 1:1). As a second characteristic, we can, therefore, put on record

⁴ Werner Georg Kümmel, *Introduction of the New Testament*, trans. by Howard Clark Kee (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975), 309.

⁵ The latter applies with some certainty to Aquila (Rom 16:3), Andronikos (16:7), Junia (16:7), and Herodion (16:11). Prisca (16:3) and Maria (16:6) were probably also Jews, and perhaps Apelles (16:10) and Rufus with his mother (16:13) too.

that the letter to the Romans is largely a letter that Paul has written to himself—respectively and more precisely: a letter that Paul the Apostle has written to Paul the Jew.

It is in Rom 4:1 where Paul the Jew is most clearly recognizable. Paul here calls Abraham “our forefather according to the flesh” (ὁ προπάτωρ ἡμῶν κατὰ σάρκα). The pronoun ἡμῶν here is a Jewish ἡμῶν, and with it, Paul associates himself with all other Jews, Christian and non-Christian alike. It is the physical descent from Abraham what all Jews, and only Jews, have in common. This unites them and separates them from the Gentiles. The Gentile Christian addressees of Romans are excluded from this, because Abraham is their father not “according to the flesh” but according to faith (cf. Rom 4:11; Gal 3:7).

The third feature that comprises the uniqueness of Romans is the substantial overlap with other letters. In Romans, Paul repeats numerous theological building blocks from previous letters, mainly from Galatians, but also from the two letters to the Christians in Corinth. Just to name the best known:⁶

From Galatians he took among others the connection of faith and righteousness, the dissociation of righteousness and the law, the reference to Abraham, quotations of the same Old Testament texts (i.e. Gen 15:6; Lev 18:5, 19:18; Hab 2:4), and the assertion that the Law is fulfilled through love (Gal 5:14; Rom 13:8–9).

From 1 Corinthians: the reference to the diversity of charisms (1 Cor 12:4–11, 28–30; Rom 12:6–8), the ecclesiological imagery of the body and its members (1 Cor 10:17; 12:12–27; Rom 12:4–5), and the admonition to show consideration for the weak fellow Christians (1 Cor 8:9, 13; Rom 14:13, 21).

And from 2 Corinthians: the talk of an “inner human being” (ἔσω ἄνθρωπος) (2 Cor 4:16; Rom 7:22) and the opposition of *πνεῦμα* and *γράμμα* (2 Cor 3:6; Rom 2:29 and 7:6) which exists nowhere else in ancient Greek literature.

There is no other Pauline letter for which anything even remotely comparable applies, and this reutilization of theological ideas and motifs demonstrate that Paul, when writing Romans, intended to provide this

⁶ For a more comprehensive list cf. Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer I* (Neukirchen-Vluyn and Ostfildern: Neukirchener and Patmos, 2014), 47–48.

letter with a profile that is suitable for representing the distinct character of his theological thinking in its synchronic and diachronic depth.

However, it would be a gross misunderstanding if we were to conclude from these observations that the question of the particular historical occasion of Romans is irrelevant to its interpretation. Of course, what applies to all other letters also applies to Romans. We cannot understand the intention of this letter properly without knowing the individual situation in which it was written. However, the consequence that has to be drawn from the three features that characterize the uniqueness of Romans is obvious: We have to look for the particular situation that explains the reason for Romans by looking to Paul and not to Rome.

ROMANS—A “PROFOUNDLY OCCASIONAL LETTER” AND A “THEOLOGICAL TREATISE”

Nowhere in his letter does Paul refer to a concrete situation specific to Rome. Even from Rom 14:1–5 we cannot reconstruct it. When he writes: “One person believes he may eat everything, while the weak person eats only vegetables” (14:2) or “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike” (14:5), Paul is describing general patterns or types of behaviour, that were to be found in many Christian communities and may be also in Rome. Therefore, Paul’s words disclose not more than that he considers it possible that such a disparity also existed among the Roman Christians. This way of presentation is typically used by someone who is not well informed about the specific situation but wants to make sure that in any case he scores a hit.

If we look at Paul’s situation, we can see the opposite, because he describes it in great detail, namely in Rom 15:22–33. Paul here informs his readers that he has finished with the proclamation of the gospel in the east of the Mediterranean and that he is planning to travel to Spain (v. 24). On the way there, he wants to stop by Rome and ask the local Christians for support. Because most of them did not yet know him personally, the letter can be interpreted as a letter of introduction, with

the help of which Paul introduces himself and his theological thinking to the Roman Christians in order to establish a relation of friendship.

But that's not all, because there is a further aspect to consider. Before coming to Rome, another journey lies ahead of him: Paul has to travel to Jerusalem to deliver the collection of the Gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia (15:25–27, 28a, 30–31). Paul thus locates his letter to the Christians in Rome at a turning point in his apostolic ministry. Moreover, he is also aware of the fact that he is about to return to that place from where he came as a Pharisee who was “zealous” for the holiness of Israel (cf. Gal 1:14; Phil 3:6; Acts 22:3). He will be returning not only as apostle of Jesus Christ, but also as representative of Gentiles. This setting explains why Paul wrote Romans in the manner he did. He is marking the turning point in his apostolic ministry by having Paul the apostle give account to Paul the Jew of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is now leading him back to Jerusalem. If we attribute this to Romans, we can also understand why Paul has endowed this letter with a theological range that distinguishes it from the other letters.

In the following I would like to illustrate this special character of Romans with reference to its relationship to Galatians, because it is this letter with which Romans is most closely associated.

THE ORIGIN OF PAUL'S DISCOURSE ON FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS IN GALATIANS

The affinity between Romans and Galatians is given by a semantic field that represents a distinct theological concept. Its core is formed by the combination of derivatives of the morphemes δικαι- (i.e. the words δίκαιος [“righteous”], δίκαιοσύνη [“righteousness”], and δίκαιοῦν [“declare righteous”]) on the one hand and πίστ- (i.e. the words πίστις [“faith”] and πιστεύειν [“believe”]) on the other hand to the ideal-typical statement ‘God declares every human individual righteous on the basis of his or her faith.’ Apart from Galatians and Romans this combination can be found only once in the Pauline epistles, namely in Phil 3:9.

Therefore, what makes the comparison of Galatians and Romans quite interesting is the difference of the respective hermeneutic framework. In the case of Galatians, we have to ask how the specific occasion of this letter influenced the emergence of this concept. In the case of Romans, we have to ask how Paul the Apostle deals with this concept when he separates it from the original situation and makes it part of the exposition of his theological thinking in a dialogue with Paul the Jew. Therefore:

THE SITUATION IN GALATIA

Paul wrote Galatians because Christian Jews had intruded into the Galatian churches who could only conceive of a Christian congregation as being part of Judaism. For this reason, they placed the emphasis on what separated Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians rather than on what both have in common. What Jewish and Gentile Christians had in common—namely, faith in Jesus Christ—was for them less important than what separated them: Jewish Christians lived according to the Torah and Gentile Christians did not. In the eyes of the opponents Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians were not primarily Christians, but Gentiles and Jews.

The Jewish Christian opponents held that participation in the salvation mediated by Jesus Christ was bound to membership in God's people, chosen through Abraham. From this they deduced the demand that Gentile Christians necessarily had to become Jewish by being circumcised. It is for this reason that Paul explicitly mentions this demand twice in Galatians (Gal 5:2; 6:12).

And what is more, Paul's opponents had a strong theological argument to support their position. They could invoke scripture, namely Gen 17:10–14. This text tells of how God establishes a covenant with Abraham and demands as a sign of participation in this covenant the circumcision of all males:

¹⁰ This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. [...] ¹³ ... So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. ¹⁴ Any uncircumcised male ... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.

It is very likely that the opponents in fact played this card with the Galatian believers, because this assumption explains why Paul suddenly begins his own argument with Abraham as well.

PAUL'S COUNTERARGUMENT: ABRAHAM'S FAITH

In Gal 3:6–9 Paul argues against his opponents' demand for circumcision by quoting three other texts from the biblical Abraham tradition and drawing conclusions from them.

⁶ Just as Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' (Gen 15:6) ⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.

⁸ And Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, proclaimed beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed' (Gen 12:3; 18:18). ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham who believed.

It is thus highly probable that it was the argumentation of the opponents based on Gen 17 that occasioned Paul's own recourse to the biblical Abraham tradition. The Galatian controversy is therefore actually a debate about the significance of Abraham. Is he important for God's people because he received the covenant of circumcision? That was the argument of the opponents. Or is he important for God's people because he was declared righteous on the basis of his faith? That was Paul's argument.

In Abraham putting faith in the word of God Paul recognized what all Christians have in common and what binds them together, namely faith in the word of God as it is proclaimed in the gospel.

This situation is of the utmost importance for locating justification in the context of Paul's theology. It shows that the assertion that justification is based on faith is not rooted in the question "How do I get a merciful God?" as it was for Luther. Rather, Paul started from what was

already a given: the significance of faith for the identity of his communities. The communities founded by him came into existence precisely because people put “faith” in his missionary preaching, and their ongoing existence depended on their ongoing adherence to this “faith.” Pauline Christianity was a religion of conversion. Hence, Christians do the same thing as Abraham did: they have faith in the word of God. And precisely in this way they also become children of Abraham, because God reckons their faith as righteousness, just as he had done with Abraham.

This means, that the connection of faith and righteousness for Paul came about through his discovery of this combination in Gen 15:6. And his attention was drawn to this text because his opponents in Galatia had established their demand for circumcision by pointing to the covenant with Abraham in Gen 17.

From this follows that there was thus both agreement and disagreement between Paul and his opponents. There was fundamental agreement in so far as both sides were convinced that they could not do without Abraham. God had chosen his people by choosing Abraham, and whoever belongs to Abraham belongs to the people of God.

The dissent between Paul and his opponents had to do with how one comes to belong to Abraham: in the opinion of the opponents, through circumcision; in the opinion of Paul, through faith in the word of God. Faith imparts belonging to Abraham without requiring a Gentile to become Jewish. It functions as a sufficient condition that opens up admission into the offspring of Abraham with no further requirements.

And there is yet another argument to support of the assumption that Paul developed his understanding of justification from Gen 15:6. In all of ancient literature, the event of God declaring a person to be righteous on the basis of faith is found exclusively in the Abraham tradition: in Gen 15:6 and in its reception history. Nowhere else.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF PAUL'S DISCOURSE ON FAITH AND RIGHTEOUSNESS INTO A THEOLOGICAL MASTER CONCEPT IN ROMANS

I would like to elucidate Paul's theological expansion of his justification discourse in Romans with reference to five aspects: his treatment of Abraham, the concept of righteousness, Paul's God-talk, anthropology, and the interaction of sin and the law.

Abraham

Paul takes up the topic of Abraham again in Rom 4:1–25. What is new here compared to the reception of the Abraham material in Galatians is that Paul explicitly relates Gen 15:6 (God's reckoning of Abraham's faith as righteousness) to Gen 17:23–27 (Abraham's circumcision) by simply referring to the sequence of the narrative: Gen 15 precedes Gen 17. From this Paul deduces that Abraham's being declared righteous on the basis of his faith in the word of God occurred completely independent from his circumcision. Therefore, he is able to emphasize that Abraham was justified while uncircumcised, that is, while he was in the same condition as the Gentiles in Paul's communities. In Rom 4:11–12 Paul thus concludes that Abraham became not only "the father of all those who believe while not circumcised" (v. 11), but also "the father of the circumcised, who are not merely circumcised but also walk in the footsteps of the foreskin faith ($\tau\tilde{\eta}\varsigma \ \acute{e}n \ \grave{\alpha}k\rho\beta\upsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha \ \pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\omega\varsigma$) of our father Abraham" (v. 12). With this qualification, Paul makes faith a necessary condition for belonging to Abraham: Abraham is only the "father of the circumcised" if they, like Abraham, also put faith in the word of God. Of even greater significance is that in Rom 4:19–21 Paul interprets Abraham's faith as "giving glory to God": Abraham "never wavered in disbelief about God's promise, but he grew strong in faith and gave glory to God ($\acute{e}n\acute{\e}d\upsilon\eta\alpha\mu\acute{\omega}\theta\eta \ \tau\tilde{\eta} \ \pi\acute{\iota}\sigma\tau\epsilon\iota, \ \delta\acute{o}\nu\varsigma \ \delta\acute{o}\xi\acute{\zeta}\alpha\eta \ \tau\tilde{\omega} \ \theta\acute{e}\tilde{\omega}$)". This verse is one of the most important texts in Paul's letters. In the Genesis narrative God had previously promised Abraham that he would have a child and that the number of

his offspring will be as innumerable as the stars (Gen 15:4–5). By human standards, the realization of such a promise is plainly impossible, because Abraham and Sara were already far beyond reproductive age. Nevertheless, according to Paul, Abraham realized that the promise was made by God, and because he was “fully convinced that God is able to perform what he had promised” (Rom 4:21), he believed in the word of God. Abraham believes the promise, because it was made by God. It is precisely this what Paul interprets as “giving glory to God”.

The words “giving glory to God” in Rom 4:21 refer back to Rom 1:21–23, where the fundamental sin of non-Jewish humanity is described. This sin consists in the fact that, “although they have known God” from his actions in creation and history, they “have not glorified him as God” (*οὐχ ὡς θεὸν ἐδόξασαν*) but have given the glory (*δόξα*) due to God alone to images of mortal creatures (v. 23). If we place the interpretation of Abraham’s faith as “giving glory to God” in Rom 4:20 in the light of this accusation, the theological significance with which Paul endows Abraham here becomes even clearer: Because Abraham believed God’s promise when he was still uncircumcised, he was the first of the Gentiles to leave behind the fundamental sin of non-Jewish humanity and was therefore declared righteous by God.

This connection opens up another insight that is no less theologically significant.

Righteousness

When Paul, on the basis of Gen 15:6 establishes the connection of “faith” (*πίστις*) the word of God and “righteousness” (*δικαιοσύνη*), he presupposes a Jewish understanding of righteousness, which has its roots in the Old Testament. Here, righteousness is normed by the demands of a relationship, be it with other human beings or with God. With respect to the relationship between God and humans this means that human individuals are considered to having acted “righteously,” if they fulfill what God is demanding of them. This includes the demand that people—like Abraham did—have to believe without reservation what

God is saying to them. And when God declared Abraham righteous on the basis of this faith (Gen 15:6), he, according to the Old Testament's and Paul's understanding of righteousness, acknowledged that Abraham responded in the way that God requires of human beings when they hear His word, be it the promise of Gen 15:4–5 or the Gospel of Christ proclaimed by Paul. They have to trust the word spoken to them, because it is the word of God. Paul presupposes this understanding of righteousness in both Galatians and Romans.

What distinguishes Romans from Galatians at this point is that in Romans Paul adds a theologically remarkable interpretation. Only in Romans, and not in Galatians, does Paul connect justification through faith with the expression “righteousness of God” (*δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*).⁷ What is characteristic of this connection is that Paul interprets justification through faith in Christ as a manifestation of God's own righteousness.

In the Protestant tradition the expression “righteousness of God” has often been interpreted as “passive righteousness” (*iustitia passiva*).⁸ According to this interpretation Paul with this expression is talking about a human quality. With the help of the genitive, it is argued, Paul wants to express that it is God alone who endows human beings with righteousness.

However, this interpretation mixes two different concepts that must be kept neatly apart. They missed the fact that also the expression “righteousness of God” presupposes an understanding of righteousness as a relational category denoting the appropriateness of behaviour within a given relationship. In this sense, when Paul speaks of the “manifestation” of God's righteousness in Rom 1:17 or 3:21, 26, he always and in accordance with the Old Testament means God's salvific action for his people. And, of course, in the relevant texts, “righteousness of God” always refers to an attribute of God and not of human beings. Isa 56:1 and Ps 98:2 illustrate this most clearly:

⁷ Cf. Rom 1:17; 3:21, 22, 25, 26; 10:3.

⁸ Cf. already Martin Luther himself in *D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe* LIV (Weimar: Böhlau, 1928), 186.7.

Isa 56:1: My salvation will come, and my righteousness will be revealed.

Ps 98:2: The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.

This means that the righteousness that God imputes to those who give him glory because they believe his word and the righteousness of God are two different concepts that are linked together by Paul only in Romans.

One concept—the righteousness of the human being that trusts in the word of God—is derived from Gen 15:6. On the basis of this text Paul, in Galatians, had developed the idea that God justifies people altogether through faith (Gal 2:16; 3:6–9, 11; 3:21, 24). Here righteousness is a quality of human beings that God imputes to them. In this context the righteousness of God does not come into play.

The other concept, the idea of God's righteousness, is represented by texts like Isa 56:1 and Ps 98:2. Here, righteousness is a quality of God and it is made manifest in God's saving intervention for his people.

Paul connects these two concepts by interpreting the righteousness, that God credits to those who believe as the manifestation of God's saving righteousness. According to Romans, God makes use of the gospel to let his saving righteousness become reality. In Rom 3:25–26 the two concepts are closest to each other:

(Christ Jesus)²⁵ whom God set forth as a propitiatory sacrifice according to faith through his blood, for a manifestation of his righteousness (*εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ*), because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins,²⁶ for a manifestation of his righteousness (*πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ*) at the present time, that he might be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus (*εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ*).

Paul here depicts the death of Jesus, which faith perceives and thus makes efficacious as a salvific event, as “manifestation” of the righteousness of God in two respects: first, for the sake of God himself (“that he might be righteous;” v. 26b), and second, for the sake of those who believe the death of Jesus being a propitiation for their sins, since it is this faith which God recognizes as righteous behaviour.

This interpretation of justification by faith as a manifestation of God's righteousness brings us to our next topic, in which we can see how Paul in Romans theologically develops what he previously wrote in Galatians.

God

If we take another look at Rom 4, we discover a further element affecting Paul's argument in this chapter, namely, how Paul speaks of God. The reference to God makes it possible for Paul to describe the faith of Abraham as a prefiguration of Christian faith. In both cases God is the reference point of faith in that sense that he is the one who overcomes death: Abraham believed in God "as the one who gives life to the dead" (Rom 4:17), and the Christians believe in God "who raised from the dead Jesus, our Lord" (Rom 4:24). Paul is therefore concerned with the unchanging identity of God, and this also includes the principles on which justification is based. With the example of Abraham, Paul wants to show that God has always justified human beings on the basis of faith and will never justify them in any other way than on the basis of faith. God never enters "works" into the "righteousness" column, only "faith":

Rom 4:2, 5: ² If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ... ⁵ And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.

What connects Christians with Abraham is the sameness of God and the consistent principles of his declaring humans righteous.

Thus, in Romans 4 Paul unfolds what he has said in the immediately preceding verses, in Rom 3:28–30:

²⁸ We maintain that a human being is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not also the God of Gentiles? Yes, also of Gentiles, ³⁰ since there is one God (*εἷς ὁ θεός*), who justifies the circumcision by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Paul speaks here of God as God. He makes recourse to the Shema Yisrael, Israel's monotheistic confession ("Hear, O Israel: Adonaj is our God, Adonaj is one"; Deut 6:4). Correspondingly, he also sublates the

distinction between Jews and Gentiles by subsuming the two under the generic term “human being” (*ἄνθρωπος*). Thus, the oneness of God finds correspondence in the anthropological unity of all human beings. At that level where God is God, Jews and Gentiles can be nothing else but humans. This finds expression in v. 30. The one God, who stands opposite all humankind (“the circumcised and the uncircumcised”), can do nothing but treat all humans equally, and that means here that he takes faith as the basis for the justification of all humans, without difference or exception. This brings us to the next topic:

Anthropology

Paul had sublated the difference between Jews and Gentiles into their being humans already in Gal 2:15–16:

¹⁵ We are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, ¹⁶ yet we know that a human being (*ἄνθρωπος*) is not declared righteous by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. We too came to believe in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law (*ἵνα δικαιωθῶμεν ἐκ πίστεως Χριστοῦ καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου*), because by works of the law no flesh (*πᾶσα σάρξ*) shall be justified.

As in Rom 3:28–30, Paul has here not only justified this thesis with the commonality of faith. He has also drawn a dividing line from the fulfillment of the Torah, which according to the understanding of Paul the Jew God had given his people so that they could demonstrate their election and distinction from the nations every day anew. What is new in Romans is that a further reason is added: The difference between Jews and Gentiles is not only made void by faith but also by sin. Accordingly, in Romans 1:18–3:20 Paul begins with a description of the universality of sin, to which both Jews and Gentiles are equally subjected. In Rom 3:9 he lets this description culminate in the statement “that Jews and Greeks—all of them are subject to sin (*πάντας ὑφ' ἀμαρτίαν εῖναι*)” and in Rom 3:20 Paul summarizes this section of his letter with recourse to Ps 142:2 by using the same words as in Gal 2:16: “By works of the law no flesh shall be justified before him.”

In Rom 5:12–14, Paul explains for the preceding description. According to this text, sin determines the nature of every human being since Adam. Because Adam as the first human being sinned, sin has become an anthropological quality. Every person who has descended from Adam must inevitably sin.

Paul develops this idea most impressively in Romans 7, where he clothes the anthropological subjection to sin in a series of metaphors.

Rom 7:14: ... I am fleshly, sold under sin.

Rom 7:17: So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.

Because humanity is “fleshly,” it is “sold under sin” (v. 14). Of course, Paul does not mean the so-called “sins of the flesh.” Rather, he uses this category as a metaphor for the inevitability of sinning. Just as human existence without “flesh” is inconceivable, so is human existence without sin inconceivable. Instead, the unavoidability of sinning is part of the basic existential equipment of every human being.

Secondly, Paul describes sin as a slave owner to whom every human being is sold and whose orders must be executed unconditionally.

And thirdly, the rule that sin exercises over every human being is conceived metaphorically as a form of demonic possession. Sin “indwells” every human being like an evil spirit. The ego, which here represents the Jewish individual who tries again and again to fulfill the Torah, has lost its autonomy and ceded its individuality to sin. This has already brought us to the last topic:

Sin and the Law

Paul’s bringing up this topic in Romans is not really surprising either, since—as already said—according to the understanding of Paul the Jew, the difference between Israel and the nations is expressed and represented by the practice of the Torah. Therefore, the Torah is an indispensable part of Israel’s election. It is, so to speak, the outwardly visible side of

election.⁹ Its fulfillment therefore also conveys “righteousness,” because only by leading a different life than the nations Israel meets the requirements of her special relationship with God consisting in the participation in God’s holiness. With this claim, the Torah naturally contradicts the role that Paul ascribes to faith in Christ, because this faith has its peculiarity in the fact, that it sublates the difference between Jews and Gentiles. Paul is therefore forced to deny the Torah its theological claim just outlined, and he does this by placing also the Torah under the rule of sin. In Gal 3:21–22 Paul had only briefly hinted at this situation:

²¹ If a law had been given that could make alive, righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But Scripture has confined everything ($\tau\alpha\pi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha$) under sin ...

By emphasizing that “Scripture has confined everything under sin” Paul makes clear that sin was in the world before the law was given. Sin has a head start over the law, because Adam was earlier than Moses. Human beings can only ever encounter the commandments of the law as sinners. Sin is always already present, and human beings can thus do nothing other than sin again and again by transgressing the law.

In Romans, this configuration is developed in more detail twice: in Rom 5 and in Rom 7.

In Rom 5:13–14 Paul emphasizes the independence of sin from the law by pointing out that death as a result of sin made people die already before the Law had been given:

¹³ For before the law sin was in the world, but sin is not accounted ($o\vee\kappa\dot{\iota}\lambda\lambda\omega\gamma\epsilon\iota\tau\alpha\iota$) where there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned like the transgression ($\pi\alpha\rho\alpha\beta\alpha\sigma\iota\varsigma$) of Adam.

This fits in with the overarching theme of the letter, insofar death is one of the qualities that Jews and Gentiles have in common. According to v. 13 the law changes the situation by letting sin become “accountable” ($\dot{\iota}\lambda\lambda\omega\gamma\epsilon\iota\tau\alpha\iota$). What is meant by this is explained in v. 14: The law gives sin a definite empirical form, namely the form of the “transgression”

⁹ Cf., e.g., Exod 19:6; Lev 11:44–45; 19:2–37; 20:26; Deut 7:6–11; 14:1–2; 26:16–19.

(παράβασις) of a commandment. This is the same form that Adam had given to his sin, and that's exactly why the law makes everything much worse: For Adam there was only one single commandment, which he could break and which he broke, whereas the law contains a large number of commandments which people can break, and which they perpetually break. This is precisely what Paul alludes to in v. 20: "The law slipped in that trespass might increase (ἴνα πλεονάσῃ τὸ παράπτωμα)." By this Paul is saying that not only does the law not prevent sin, but it even multiplies it, and instead of helping humanity, it entangles humanity deeper and deeper into an existence ruled by sin.

In Rom 7 Paul delivers an apology for the Torah. The law as such is not sin (v. 7a). He wants to ward off the impression that could arise from what he has written before: that the Torah itself is responsible for sin. In contrast to this impression, Paul makes it clear that the law as "the law of God" (vv. 22, 25b), which, like God himself, is "holy", righteous" and "good" (v. 12), is merely utilized by sin. Paul shows what happens when sin encounters a law. While sin as such, i.e. independent from the law, is innocuous (v. 8), it is only through the law that it is made active. In this context, it is of crucial importance that Paul places the relationship between sin and the law in the light of the story of Adam:

Rom 7:11: Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me (ἐξηπάτησέν με) and through it killed me.

Paul here depicts the encounter of the exemplary Jewish self with the Torah as reprise of the story of Adam's fall. He transfers the role of the serpent to sin which ensures that the same deception, into which Adam was led, is repeated again and again when a Jewish individual encounters a commandment of the Torah. Here too, Paul's account aims to level out the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish humanity with respect to the Torah: Paul wants to demonstrate that the Jewish use of the Torah is determined by one and the same *condicio humana*, which Jews and non-Jews have in common. He is bringing to mind that every Jewish self is an adamic self and that this very "adamicity" also determines its handling of the Torah.

At this point, a brief intermediary conclusion can be drawn: In his discourse on sin, Paul aims at the same goal as in his discourse on faith. He intends to prove that there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, because both, the former just like the latter, are ruled by sin. Here too Paul is grappling with Jewish election theology, and his implicit dialogue partner is none other than Paul the Jew. Vis-à-vis him, Paul the apostle questions the Jewish certainty that before God there is a difference between Jews and Gentiles.

HYPOTHETICAL CONCLUSION

If we were to draw a conclusion at this point, a coherent picture would emerge. It reveals the semantic field of a theological concept coming to expression in three key texts from Galatians:

Gal 3:28: There is neither Jew nor Greek (οὐκ ἔνι Ιουδαῖος οὐδὲ Ἔλλην), there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (πάντες γὰρ ὑμεῖς εἰς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ).

Gal 5:6: In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision avails anything, but faith working through love (ἐν γὰρ Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ οὕτε περιτομή τι ἰσχύει οὕτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη).

Gal 6:15: Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation (οὕτε γὰρ περιτομή τι ἐστιν οὕτε ἀκροβυστία ἀλλὰ καινὴ κτίσις).

With the help of this semantic field Paul creates a symbolic universe in which there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. In Romans, this assurance of reality is concentrated twice in one and the same statement: οὐ γάρ ἔστιν διαστολή (“there is no distinction”). In Rom 3:22 Paul explains it anthropologically (Jews are sinners just like Gentiles), and in Rom 10:12–13 he unfolds it soteriologically (Jews and Gentiles have one and the same Lord, who will save everyone who calls on his name).

It is not only between the lines that Paul practices a Christian identity management to prove that faith in Christ establishes membership in the people of God chosen in Abraham. Insofar this faith and the salvation

based on it are necessarily and fundamentally open for all people—regardless of whether they are Jews and live according to the Torah or they are not and do not. Attributions of identity that are based on different assurances of reality are thereby made theologically invalid. It is, therefore, not surprising that Paul the Apostle develops this theological context of justification in Romans in dialogue with Paul the Jew.

However, if I were to stop here, the overall picture would remain incomplete, because there is another theological development from Galatians to Romans that contradicts most of what I have said so far. This is Paul the Apostle's answer to a theologically essential question posed to him by Paul the Jew:

WHAT ABOUT ISRAEL?

I want to specify this question and ask more precisely: What about the non-Christian majority of Israel? This clarification is needed because Paul uses the term Israel inconsistently. In Romans, he often uses “Israel” as an umbrella term for all Jews. From this follows that every Jew who confesses Jesus as “Lord” does not cease to belong to Israel (cf. esp. Rom 9:6, 27; 11:1, 7, 25, 26). Only sometimes does Paul restrict this designation to non-Christian Jews. In Rom 11:7 both references appear side by side. Paul calls the Christian members of Israel ἡ ἐκλογή, whereas he considers all the others (*οἱ λοιποί*) as “having been hardened” (*ἐπωρώθησαν*). It is the latter that are in the focus of this section.

In Gal 4, Paul has drawn three lines of connection between Abraham's family and the current situation: First, he puts the non-Christian majority of Israel, “the present Jerusalem … with her children”, in an allegorical correspondence to the slave Hagar, because they as well as she were slaves (v. 25). Conversely, he qualifies the Gentile-Christians as being represented by Isaac, the son of a free woman (vv. 23b, 28). And finally, by quoting Gen 21:10 he states indirectly that “the present Jerusalem … with her children” were excluded from Abraham's inheritance.

Gal 4:30: What does Scripture say? ‘Throw out the slave woman and her son. For the son of the slave woman will not inherit along with the son of the free woman’ (*Gen 21:10*).

In Romans, Paul takes up the question of the current situation of Israel’s non-Christian majority again, and his answer could hardly be clearer: The difference between Israel and the nations, based on God’s election, still applies. Because non-Christian Jews still belong to Israel, whom God has chosen to be his people and set apart from the other nations, they continue to occupy an exceptional status vis à vis the Gentiles. Paul bases this certainty on two arguments:

On the one hand, by focusing on God: In Rom 3:1–4, Paul the Apostle answers Paul the Jew’s question, as to whether the unfaithfulness of some Jews can render their exceptional status vis-à-vis the Gentiles irrelevant, in an unambiguous manner:

¹ What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much in every way! ... ³ What if some were unfaithful (*ἡπίστησαν*)? Will their unfaithfulness (*ἀπίστια*) nullify the faithfulness (*πίστις*) of God? ⁴ Certainly not! Indeed, God will be true whereas ‘every human being is a liar’ (*Ps 115:2*).

The pivotal point of Paul’s argument is that he transforms the relationship between God and Israel into the relationship between God and humanity: Human unfaithfulness can never cause God to abandon his faithfulness, because it can never reach it. When God elected Israel to be his chosen nation he did not react to a certain quality or behaviour of this people. Instead, he has chosen Israel unconditionally and voluntarily. And because it was not a certain behaviour of Israel that caused God to choose this nation, according to Paul, no behaviour on its part is conceivable that could cause God to withdraw his election. In Rom 11:29, Paul summarizes the result of this argument: “Irrevocable (*ἀμεταμέλητα*) are God’s gifts and his call.”

Paul’s second argument is drawn from his view on Israel’s non-Christian majority itself. We encounter it three times in Rom 11:

Rom 11:16: If the firstfruits are holy, so too is the lump. If the root is holy, so too are the branches.

Rom 11:24: ... how much more will these, *οἱ κατὰ φύσιν*, be grafted into their own olive tree.

Rom 11:28b: ... concerning the election they are beloved for the sake of the fathers.

These statements leave no doubt: For Paul, Israel's non-Christian majority still holds an exceptional status with God. This is due to nothing other than that they belong to that people whose "fathers" God had chosen from among the nations. And what is more: He even assumes that this exceptional status is mediated *κατὰ φύσιν* (v. 24), i.e. by the continuity of physical descent and that it cannot be lost. God loves Jews because they are Jews; he loves Gentiles only after they have become Christians. That is why Paul can confidently state in v. 26 that "all Israel will be saved (*πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται*)."³³ He remains silent about how this is supposed to happen, and he probably didn't know either.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that not only this solution to the question "What about Israel?," but especially its theological substantiation is in tension with the assertion, formulated several times in the first part of Romans, that there is no distinction before God between Jews and Gentiles. We therefore cannot avoid the conclusion that Paul did not succeed in finding a theologically coherent solution of this tension. And what is even more: Also, he himself was fully aware of this failure. We can infer this from the concluding hymn in which he states the incomprehensibility of God's ways (Rom 11:33–36):

³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unfathomable are his decisions and unsearchable his ways! ³⁴ For who has understood the mind of the Lord? Or who has become his counselor? ³⁵ Or who has given him a reward beforehand? ³⁶ For out of him and through him and to him are all things. To him the glory for ever and ever! Amen.

With these words Paul himself states that he has reached the end of his wisdom. His theological reflections on the Israel question have led him into an aporia. The interpreters of Paul are well advised not to try to be smarter than him. Therefore, it is appropriate to stop here.