

The Romans Debate*

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The Romans debate is the title of a renowned collection of articles published almost half a century ago and revised over 30 years ago.¹ It reflected at that time a debate, not a consensus. The scholars contributing to this volume ranged from those with an interest in the social history and literary character of Romans to those known for pursuing thematic and theological coherence. They disagreed on several issues. Attempts have been made more recently to resolve the debate, but without any significant success.² The extremely rich reception history of Romans illustrates well the plurality of its meaning effects at different times and places.³ It is significant that Karl Barth's commentary on this letter was one of the most influential books in theology during the last century.⁴ It is likewise noteworthy that the prominent philosopher Giorgio Agamben published his seminars on Walter Benjamin and the messianic time by commenting

* This paper was delivered as introduction to the conference on Paul's letter to the Romans held at Lund University 23–24 September 2024.

¹ *The Romans Debate: Revised and Expanded Edition*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991). The first edition was published in 1977. The revised edition is dedicated to Günther Bornkamm, whose famous article on Romans as Paul's last will and testament spurred a long-standing debate about the purpose of Romans.

² Andrew A. Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). Das' solution to the debate is to interpret Romans as a letter addressed to Christ-believing gentile God-fearers. As will be evident below, this particular issue is not settled.

³ See the volumes in the series "Romans Through History and Culture" edited by Daniel Patte and Cristina Grenholm and published by Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Der Römerbrief* (2nd ed.; München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1922).

on the first ten words of the letter.⁵ Many more publications could be listed. It should come as no surprise that the Romans debate continues to this day.

Several issues that have challenged scholars for a long time remain to be resolved. Why did Paul dictate Romans? To whom was it addressed, to (God-fearing) Gentiles only or to an ethnically mixed audience? What did the text of letter originally look like? What kind of letter is it? What is Paul's view on Israel and the Jewish people according to Romans? What is the precise theological significance of his gospel in this letter? Which are the issues caused by the specific situation of Paul and by the communities in Rome and which are Paul's deeply rooted convictions? The questions could be multiplied.

This is not to say that there is no agreement. Most evidently, no one denies that Paul dictated the letter to Tertius at Corinth in the late 50s; no one argues today that chapter 16 was originally a separate letter added to Romans at a later time; no one denies that Paul is more theologically elaborate in Romans than in any of his other letters; no one denies the emphasis on his apostolic status and mission in Romans; and no one would ignore the importance of God's righteousness in the letter. The agreements are significant, to be sure, but the disagreements concern both overarching questions as well as socio-historical, literary and theological details.

When compiling a list of over 40 monographs and anthologies on Romans published during the last 30 years, I expected to see some trends of the debate during this period. The list includes the following publications (in alphabetical order):

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Il tempo che resta: Un commentato alla Lettera ai Romani* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000). English translation *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

- J. N. Aletti, *God's Justice in Romans: Keys for Interpreting the Epistle to the Romans* (2010)
- T. W. Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant to Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17–29* (2000)
- R. H. Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy: The Origin and Purpose of the Jealousy Motif in Romans 9–11* (1994)
- R. H. Bell, *No One Seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18–3.20* (1998)
- R. M. Calhoun, *Paul's Definition of the Gospel in Romans 1* (2011)
- A. Cignac, *Juifs et Chrétiens à l'École de Paul de Tarse. Enjeux identitaires et éthiques d'une lecture de Romains 9–11* (1999)
- W. Dabourne, *Purpose and Cause in Pauline Exegesis: Romans 1.16–4.25 and a New Approach to the Letters* (1999)
- A. A. Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (2007)
- B. C. Dunson, *Individual and Community in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (2012)
- Ph. F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans* (2003)
- J. Flebbe, *Solus Deus. Untersuchungen zur Rede von Gott im Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (2008)
- M. Forman, *The Politics of Inheritance in Romans* (2011)
- S. J. Gathercole, *Where is Boasting? Early Jewish Soteriology and Paul's Response in Romans 1–5* (2002)
- B. R. Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel according to Paul* (2016)
- B. R. Gaventa (ed.), *Apocalyptic Paul: Cosmos and Anthropos in Romans 5–8* (2016)
- K. A. Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God's Righteousness* (2002)
- A. J. Guerra, *Romans and the Apologetic Tradition: The Purpose, Genre and Audience of Paul's Letter* (1995)

- R. Rodríguez and M. Thiessen (ed), *The So-Called Jew in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (2016)
- S. C. Keesmaat and B. J. Walsh, *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice* (2019)
- W. Keller, *Gottes Treue – Israels Heil. Röm 11,25–27. Die These vom "Sonderweg" in der Diskussion* (1998)
- J. D. Kim, *God, Israel, and the Gentiles: Rhetoric and Situation in Romans 9–11* (2000)
- K. Kujanpää, *The Rhetorical Functions of Scriptural Quotations in Romans: Paul's Argumentation by Quotations* (2018)
- J. L. Sumney (ed.), *Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans* (2012)
- H. Lichtenberger, *Das Ich Adams und das Ich der Menschheit. Studien zum Menschenbild in Römer 7* (2004)
- O. Mainville, *Un plaidoyer en faveur de l'unité. La Lettre aux Romain* (1999)
- S. McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (2019)
- J. C. Miller, *The Obedience of Faith, the Eschatological People of God and the Purpose of Romans* (2000)
- J. D. Moores, *Wrestling with Rationality in Paul: Romans 1–8 in a New Perspective* (1995)
- M. D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (1996)
- M. Neubrand, *Abraham – Vater von Juden und Nichtjuden. Eine exegetische Studie zu Röm 4* (1997)
- M. Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1–15.13 in Context* (1999)
- A. Reichert, *Der Römerbrief als Gratwanderung. Eine Untersuchung zur Abfassungs-problematik* (2001)
- A. Ricker, *Ancient Letters and the Purpose of Romans: The Law of the Membrane* (2020)
- D. A. Shaw, *The 'Apocalyptic' Paul: An Analysis and Critique with Reference to Romans 1–8* (2024)

- S.-L. Shum, *Paul's Use of Isaiah in Romans: A Comparative Study of Paul's Letter to the Romans and the Sibylline and Qumran Sectarian Texts* (2002)
- C. Song, *Reading Romans as a Diatribe* (2004)
- D. Starnitzke, *Die Struktur paulinischen Denkens im Römerbrief. Eine linguistisch-logische Untersuchung* (2004)
- K. Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (1995)
- G. Theißen and P. von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief. Rechenschaft eines Reformators* (2016)
- R. M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography* (2003)
- B. Vaughn (J. Wu), *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes: Honor and Shame in Paul's Message and Mission* (2019)
- X. P. B. Viagulamuthu, *Offering our Bodies as a Living Sacrifice to God: A Study of Pauline Spirituality Based on Romans 12,1* (2002)
- J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Israel and Paul "in Concert" in the Letter to the Romans* (2002)
- J. C. Walters, *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans: Changing Self-Definitions in Earliest Roman Christianity* (1994).⁶

The list is selective, but the impression is nevertheless perplexing. The publications deal with a vast variety of issues, and they betray no major trend. Some of them focus once more on the dominating motifs in Romans (e.g., Aletti, Esler, Grieb, Gaventa, Keesmaat and Walsh, Mainville, McKnight, Stendahl). Others discuss again the purpose of parts or all of Romans (Bell, Dabourne, Guerra, Miller, Ricker). In all their diversity, these publications indicate perhaps a tendency to see coherence rather than contradictions and irresolvable particularities in Romans, in distinction to some earlier Pauline scholarship. The long-standing debate about Paul and the Jews is regularly dealt with in several studies (e.g. Bell, Cignac, Das, Keller, Kim, Nanos). While the more specific discussion

⁶ This list corresponds to the bibliography in my commentary *Romarbrevet 9–16*, Kommentar till Nya testamentet 6b (Uppsala: Bibelakademiförlaget, 2024).

about Israel's way to salvation seems to have come full circle, the Jewishness of Paul's theology in the letter is still open to debate. Other studies range from detailed investigations of passages and sections in Romans—often revised doctoral dissertations—to studies with new hermeneutical approaches.

Limiting the list to volumes published during the last ten years, a somewhat more coherent picture emerges. These nine volumes are as follows (in chronological order):

Gaventa (ed.), *Apocalyptic Paul* (2016)

Gaventa, *When in Romans* (2016)

Rodríguez and Thiessen (ed.), *The So-Called Jew in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (2016)

Theißen and von Gemünden, *Der Römerbrief* (2016)

Keesmaat and Walsh, *Romans Disarmed* (2019)

McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards* (2019)

Vaughn (J. Wu), *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes* (2019)

Ricker, *Ancient Letters and the Purpose of Romans* (2020)

Shaw, *The 'Apocalyptic' Paul* (2024)

Ricker's investigation and the volume edited by Rodríguez and Thiessen show that historical issues that have been debated for a long time continue to challenge scholars. Theissen's and von Gemünden's book combines the older Lutheran perspective and the new perspective on Paul and restates the theological importance of Romans; and Gaventa's book likewise urges the readers to linger in Romans and detect the cosmic dimension of the gospel. The study of Keesmaat and Walsh as well as those of McKnight and Vaughn try, each in its own way, to interpret Romans from a new angle. They do this not so much by relating to Lutheran theology or other current perspectives on Paul, but with a focus on additional hermeneutical possibilities. The list starts and ends with two

publications enhancing Paul's apocalyptic perspective in Romans. Four trends emerge:

- Recurring historical issues
- Recurring theological readings
- New hermeneutical readings
- Apocalyptic

A comprehensive account of the scholarship on Romans should of course include also articles. This is often where we find the cutting-edge of the current debate. They would make the picture more complex, indeed. To take one example: a recent issue of *New Testament Studies* re-opens the question of the addressees of Romans, arguing that the greetings in chapter 16 include the actual recipients of the letter and indicate an ethnically mixed audience.⁷ What seemed like a scholarly consensus is challenged and suddenly less obvious.

Interesting to notice, however, is that the interest in apocalypticism frames the list with one publication from 2016 and one from 2024. Is this an indication that Albert Schweitzer's old idea of the apocalyptic mysticism of Paul is recurring, that Ernst Käsemann's influential proposal of apocalyptic as the mother of all theology is still of relevance, or that J. Christiaan Beker's insistence that Paul thought and acted on the basis of his deep apocalyptic experience at the Damascus road comes back as a revised perspective on Romans?⁸ Or is this merely a reflection of our

⁷ Peter M. Head, "The Greetings of Romans 16 and the Audience of Romans," *New Testament Studies* 70 (2024), 262–274. Notably also Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 70–72.

⁸ Albert Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1930); Ernst Käsemann, "Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 57 (1960), 160–85; J Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980). This trend is unexpectedly emerging also in the study of other parts of the NT. See e.g. Olegs Andrejevs, *Apocalypticism in the Synoptic Sayings Source: A Reassessment of Q's Stratigraphy*, WUNT 2.499 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2019).

own sense of living at the end of times? Whatever the oblique causes of our interpretations, there seems to be an emerging agreement among a variety of scholars that Paul's mission was based on his firm conviction that the final apocalyptic disclosure was at hand.⁹ And where is this more evident but in the references in Romans to, for instance, God's powerful gospel and righteousness, the climactic mystery of the final salvation of Jews and Gentiles and the urgent appeal to know what time it is and wake from sleep?

Today we have the annual meeting of Biblical scholars in Sweden, for the first time together discussing one of the most influential writings of the Bible. Anders Nygren and Krister Stendahl are perhaps the most well-known Swedish interpreters of Romans. Nygren wrote a commentary on primarily chapters 1–11, and Stendahl a booklet on Paul's final missionary account in Romans.¹⁰ Although both were bishops in the Church of Sweden in their time, there is little if any significant agreement between their readings of Romans. Their different academic profiles and interests dominate instead. Nygren, also professor of systematic theology, was perhaps truer to his Lutheran heritage, stressing Paul's proclamation of the new age and of God's gift of righteousness. Stendahl, for a long time professor of New Testament studies and an influential promoter of the inter-religious dialogue, saw in Romans more of mission strategy than a Lutheran theology. Personally, I am convinced that Romans, while certainly intended to advance Paul's mission in Spain, is a strongly theological letter. It reflects Paul's apostolic understanding of himself and his mission, sophisticatedly communicating his apocalyptic vision of God's

⁹ For an overview, see Jamie Davies, *The Apocalyptic Paul: Retrospect and Prospect*, Cascade Library of Pauline Studies (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2022).

¹⁰ Anders Nygren, *Pauli brev till romarna*, Tolkning av Nya testamentet 6 (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses bokförlag, 1944); Krister Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995).

gospel and righteousness disclosed in the faithfulness of his son, the Jewish Messiah and Lord of all.¹¹

The Romans debate will continue in Sweden and elsewhere. Possibilities are the nerve of scholarly inquiry. Rather than frustrating us, they might stimulate mutual debate and collaboration and challenge us to move on in recurrent as well as new landscapes of scholarship and arrive at a more profound understanding of Romans.

¹¹ This is the general perspective that has emerged during my work with the letter. See the introductory reflections and the concluding comments on Paul's theological convictions in Romarbrevet 9–16.