

My Journey of Understanding Paul's Letter to the Romans

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Romans Overview

A few years ago, I thought that Romans was a fuller description of Galatians or a treatise on individual salvation or some combination of the two. Long taken by Protestant exegetes as such, I did have some nagging questions when I read through most commentaries. Under the 'individual salvation' view of Romans, I couldn't answer several questions, some of which were:

- If Romans is an expanded version of Galatians, and Paul is combating 'legalism,' how come he is *protective* of Jewish ways in Romans 14-15 rather than *castigating* of them as he is in Galatians?
- What is the logical connection of Rom.9-11 to the rest of the book? The common explanation, 'To answer the problem of God's faithfulness to Israel,' is unsatisfying to explain such a lengthy treatment. Why not just skip from Romans 1-8 to Romans 12-16 with just a few words in between?

N.T. Wright, Douglas J. Moo and Frank Thielman combine the historical and literary elements together well for excellent exegesis on Romans. Romans actually expresses the mirror-image concern behind Galatians. In Romans, Paul was not afraid of an inner circle of Judaizers taking over the church and reinstating Jewish privilege; he was concerned that the predominantly Gentile church would reject Jewish believers.

Historical Background

Roman proselytes to Judaism and Roman Jews were present at Pentecost, mentioned in Acts 2:10, and presumably returned to Rome to start the church there. They were an ethnically mixed congregation. However, it is reasonable to assume that Paul, writing around 57 AD, was concerned about Claudius' earlier decree of 49 AD to expel Jews from Rome. Now that the more capricious Nero sat on the throne, who knew whether that edict would be enforced, or even broadened? Indeed, this must have alarmed him because, as it has been documented by ancient sources, this decree was Rome's response to the Jewish disturbances in Rome that had taken place against the Christian church. It was a tense and riotous time. The synagogues had instigated outright violence against the Christians, not only in Rome, but also elsewhere throughout the empire. On many occasions, Paul himself had personally been the target and victim of Jewish hatred, but he demonstrated a strange unwillingness to draw the attention of the Roman authorities, taking upon himself the beatings until his opportunity came to confront Rome with the gospel.

The thought in Paul's mind, therefore, could very well have been this: Gentile Christians in Rome, ready as they may have been to stop endangering their own lives by association with Jewish Christians, would isolate themselves. They would marginalize their Jewish Christian brethren, throw off respect for Judaism altogether, and stop evangelizing the Jews. They might also exacerbate the tension between church and synagogue by retaliating. Shrewd Gentile Christians with anti-Semitic leanings and knowledge of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse against Jerusalem might have reasoned that the uprise in violence would have drawn the inevitable attention of Rome once again. The imperial response could have ranged from another expulsion of those Jews from Rome to the systematic persecution of Jews throughout the empire (since disturbances were already well known and at that time, Jews were more notorious than Christians for being dissidents). Although this would have fit perfectly within an anti-Semitic scheme to put the Jews in hot water, and even though Gentile Christians would in fact do this for centuries, this situation would have run flatly against Paul's convictions on all levels.

Gentile Christian arrogance would have expressed itself in many ways: believing that Jews should no longer be the concern of Gentile Christian mission (countered in Rom.1-3, especially 1:16-17), believing that the promise to Abraham makes the carrying over of Jewish Christian respect for the Mosaic Law completely irrelevant (countered explicitly in Rom.3-8, especially Rom.3:1-8, 3:27-31, 4:16-17 and 7:1-13), believing that Israel was completely rejected by God (countered in Rom.9-11), believing that preserving the racial unity of the church was merely optional (countered in Rom.12:1-16), trying to retaliate against the synagogue to further arouse the Roman state against the Jews (countered in Rom.12:17-13:10), and believing that Jewish Christian customs were nonsensical and now the subject of ridicule as opposed to sensitivity (countered in Rom.14:1-15:13). This conflicted directly with Paul's personal conviction of going 'to the Jew first' (Rom.1:16) and then to the Gentile, which itself stemmed from the underlying facts

that the gospel was Hebraic in origin and then universal in scope, and that the church must be unified in love across Jewish and Gentile boundaries (thus following Rom.11:25-36 comes the appeal to unity, Rom.12:1-16). This explains to me why Paul is protective of the Jewish Christians in 14-15 rather than castigating of them as in Galatians – because there wasn't an ideology wrapped around Jewish ethnic expression being imposed on others. There was potentially, however, Gentile anti-Semitism that simply could not be tolerated, and Paul, wanting to use Rome as his base of missionary operations in the west as he had done with Antioch in the east, anticipated this conflict.

For me, this explanation of Romans makes more sense. What this means for the subject of 'individual salvation,' which is still important while not being the main subject of Romans, is germane here. Humanity in general is 'in Adam' and is 'under sin and death' (5:12-21). Gentiles therefore need to die with Christ and rise with Christ (Rom.6:1-11) to escape that realm. Paul then gives some admonitions to know their identity as united and alive with Christ (6:11), as bondslaves to Christ (6:15-23). For Jewish Christians, they were previously in the 'jurisdiction' of the Law (7:1). Therefore, Jewish Christians were 'made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that [they] would be joined to another, to him who was raised from the dead' (Rom.7:4). The same mechanics of Jesus' cross and resurrection apply. Thus, both the Gentile and the Jew must die with Jesus and rise with Jesus. This changes our identity, for the old self dies (6:6) and a new self is born. Paul's basis for appealing to a new identity in Jesus would be impossible if all that happened at the cross was 'Jesus died instead of you and me.' For if what really changed was God's attitude towards me, and I remained fundamentally a sinner on the level of my identity, then Paul's line of exhortation would have no basis in fact. And if what really happened was Jesus died on the cross instead of me, then I am left unchanged on a fundamental level. Rather, what happened at the cross is that I died with Jesus. And what must follow that statement logically is that I rose with Jesus a new creation, and all this by the Spirit. Again, what follows from this is that Gentiles and Jews become part of one covenant community (e.g. one tree, Rom.11:17-24) through one covenant mediator, Jesus.

What this means in general is that Romans is about *God's global mission*: Jew and Gentile becoming one covenant community in Christ, with an ongoing respect for ethnic Israel. This would mean that the climax of Paul's theological argumentation is not Romans 8, with Romans 9-11 being a tangential response to a question that could have come in through the backdoor. Rather, the climax of Romans is chapter 11, the missionary mindset Paul gives the church concerning both Jew and Gentile. This is evidenced by the sweeping doxology of praise Paul gives at the end of Romans 11. From that very point, Romans 12-16 very naturally answer the practical concerns of how to keep the unity of the body between Gentile and Jew, which was intended as such, not as an analogy for Gentile Christians on 'how to deal with our legalistic brethren.' For instance, Paul's admonition, 'do not be conformed to the pattern of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind that you may prove (i.e. demonstrate) what the will of God is' (12:2) refers not to a historically dislocated 'timeless truth' about Christians being different from the world in whatever way we perceive it. Rather, it refers to the need for the multi-ethnic body of Christ to buck the pattern of the world, the world that divides itself by Jew and Gentile (the worldview of Genesis – Malachi). How would Christians do this? By being mentally transformed by Paul's reminders in Romans 1-11 concerning Jews and Gentiles being beckoned into one community in Christ. And then by demonstrating the will of God concerning Jew and Gentile in response to this gospel by living as one community. The explanatory power of this solution is much better than anything I have ever seen.