

ROMANS

SONG OF THE HEART SET FREE

'Romans' is a great fugue, unfurling in waves, a great shout of jubilation (c.8)'. Jacob Taubes

SUMMARY

Paul spent almost all of his working years opposing 'Rome' (the imperial, patronal system of domination) – but he spent his last years in the city of Rome, in a 'friendly' kind of house arrest, awaiting a trial that never happened. He died there. Before going there, he wrote a letter to the Christians there, most of whom he had not known previously. It is a more mature, moderate statement of many things he had said earlier and more passionately to others – as close to a theological treatise as you get in Paul. He wanted to go to Spain and needed the support (financial and otherwise) of the Rome community to do so. In his letter, he wrote about God: about how God was bound-to-God to act always for more and more positivity in the world. He wrote about the world: about how the world was flooded with this energy of God. He said all this was pure gift, and had to be received and welcomed and responded to with total openness. For that, a kind of 'circumcision of the heart' was needed – a removal of all obstacles to this full reception of the Full God. He called it agape, a love of a different kind. He said we were all of us redeemed-included into this. Jesus is the only man who ever lived it fully, and he is thereby presented to us as the only one to exert universal influence, with this same excess of goodness, in the universe. He is alive in us now. This is not a sporadic thing, it is a stable reality, and we can indeed permanently 'live-with-in' him, risen. As a result we relate to everyone around us without self-interest and with very willing attitudes, to share with them what Jesus has shared with us. This is not an 'idea' or a 'theory' – it's patently there, and real, and the proof of it is the 'Spirit' that makes things happen that are congruent with it all.

'Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ, even if we are troubled or worried, or being persecuted, or lacking food or clothes, or being threatened or attacked....These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved us. For I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.' Rm 8, 35-39

ROME

It is a mistake to imagine Rome at this time populated with Italians! They may have been no more than ten or twelve percent of the **population**. There was a saying: the Orontes has been flowing into the Tiber. It meant that there was a flood of Eastern migrants into Rome. Some would have been black. Rome was not so much home for a people who had been there for generations, as a way of life for anyone who came there.



St Paul

There was a significant number of **Jews in Rome**. Josephus estimates (generously?) some 8,000 in 4 bce. Philo says that they lived in the 'great section across the Tiber' (Trastevere). There were 13 synagogues. Claudius in 41 forbade them to meet in public, and in 49 he expelled them from Rome, because of disturbances, 'impulsore Cresto'. Most returned at Claudius's death in 54, e.g. Prisc(ill)a and Aquila.

We do not know much for sure about the **early history of the Christian community in Rome**, i.e. who founded it, or when. There is no clear historical evidence that Peter founded it. It is doubtful if any apostle founded it. [Paul's practice was not to go to any community founded by an apostle, and he went there.] John Meier has considered an opinion that

the group existed in Rome before Jesus was crucified. Tacitus is the main source for anything about the early times of the community in Rome, but he is writing at the end of his long life about events that are much more than a half-century behind him.

The Christian community, in Paul's time, was made up of Jews and Gentiles, but mostly convert Jews. It is probably wrong to speak of 'the' Christian community in Rome. The Christians in Rome were a **mix** of convert Jews and God-fearers (interested Gentiles) – picked up by Paul around various synagogues, and forming **separate Christian communities**. He never calls them 'ekklesia' in the singular. Prisca and Aquila seem to be the central unifying persons among them. The convert Jews, together with other Jews there, left Rome in 49, and most of them came back in 54 at the death of Claudius. The Gentile Christians wanted to marginalize them, and even exclude them, and have no mission to Jews. They also wanted to articulate their Christian identity in non-Jewish terms. Paul was negative to all this, and it is right to see in the letter to the Romans some attempt to address these issues.

*The early pre-Paul history of the Roman Christians hinges around the return of expelled Jewish Christians (and other Jews) to Rome. The relations they had then with Gentile Christians who had remained in Rome, were volatile. Before their expulsion, the Jesus groups in Rome were largely Jewish, and they were a sectarian-style movement within Judaism. Like all sects, they were on a path of separation from their matrix in the synagogue. And like all separated sects, they picked and chose elements of Judaism they wanted to retain (e.g. some elements of Torah, but not circumcision, which was practiced in diaspora synagogues). After the return of the expelled Jewish Christians, the majority of the Christians in the Roman groups were Gentile. The new amalgam had to seek and find a new social identity. It had to **re-define its sectarianism** in two new ways. It had to see itself as a reform movement of Judaism while leaving 'mainstream' Judaism, and do so with minimum alienation from the mainstream. It also had to see itself as a kind of reform movement of Roman Gentile life while distinguishing itself from that culture and taking a critical position against that culture. All this dynamic is not worked through fully when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. It is in the 'after the return' period. The primary addressees are clearly Gentile-Christians there but the Jewish Christians are significantly in mind. Different parts of the letter have different reference sub-groups in mind. You could say that the letter is para-Judaistic rather than post-Judaistic or non-Judaistic. You could on the other hand say it is anti-Gentile... So Francis Watson, Durham, 2008.*

It is wrong to think that Paul is writing an abstract thesis for people he did not know personally. It is interesting to look at the **names of individuals** in Rome who are given specific mention in Rm 16. Prisca, Aquila, Epaenetus, Mary, Andronicus and Junia, Ampliatus, Urban, Stachys, Apelles, Aristobulus (and his household), Herodion, Narcissus (and his household), Tryphaena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus (and his mother), Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hernas (and all the brothers who are with them), Phylologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, Olympas – and all the others! [Sometimes I wish the letter was not named ‘to the Romans’ but to each and every one of these!] It is also assumed that these people know Phoebe, and Timothy, and Jason, and Sosipater, and ‘I, Tertius’ who wrote out this letter! Perhaps they knew too Gaius, and Erastus, and Quartus from Corinth...

There were further **questions** among them: why did God choose historical Israel in the first place? Why are the people of covenant, Israel or the Church, not morally whole and transfigured? And so on. These questions underpin the whole letter to the Romans.

Paul wrote to them in **Greek** (the lingua franca in Rome at that time), at the end of his third missionary journey, between 54 and 58, that is, within the first five years of Nero. Paul wrote from Achaia, most likely from Corinth. Gaius and Erastus (Corinthians) send their greetings in the letter. Timothy, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater do so as well, and they are with Paul in Corinth. Tertius is the amanuensis. Phoebe, from Cenchraeae, near Corinth, is the carrier of the letter, and probably its first public reader to the gathered Romans.

Tradition says Paul was martyred in Rome under Nero. He was buried, and eventually his remains were transferred to what is now the basilica of St. Paul outside the Walls. In 64 there was a fire in Rome, which burned half the city down. And Nero, who was quite mad, blamed the Christians for the fire. I suspect there were reprisals, and I suspect the reprisals amounted to the execution and martyrdom of most of the Christian community in Rome. My own persuasion, from other people’s suggestions, or perhaps better, my guess is, that Paul was included among them. And I just like to think, that even if his remains were gathered and he was buried and enshrined in a church, he might have been one of those anonymous little people that were put down after the fire – anywhere in Rome. And that would be a perfect kenotic result. I’ve no proof and nobody else can prove anything else anyway. Who cares! I don’t have any case for saying that he died at Tre Fontane and that they chopped his head off,

and it bounced three times. That's a slip of imagination, which I willingly refer to a third umpire.

Paul wrote partly because he wanted the support of Rome in a projected trip to **Spain**. He had planned to go there for quite a time (probably via Jerusalem). He was also interested in the Roman community itself. It is the only letter written to a community before he had been there.

His letter to them is calm, and measured. It is like a **mature, and moderate statement** of things he had said more emotionally earlier. He speaks of the way God plans for a positive world; of how God is bound in justice to GodSelf to uphold that plan, bountifully; of how all creation is meant – through the unfolding of that plan - to be flooded with this transfiguring God. For that to happen, a kind of 'circumcision' of the heart is needed, so that humans can receive all this as pure gift. A lot of things, historically, get in the way. They always did. That is why God chose one people, Israel, in whom things could work out positively, so that they could show all other peoples what it was really all about. That plan didn't succeed in the ordinary sense of that word, so one Jew, Jesus, came from God to carry out the vocation of Israel. Since his resurrection we are all enabled to live that positivity and that fullness of freedom. Then we can love God, Jesus, Israel, all nations, one another. Paul called this love AGAPE... love the way God loves.

Paul knew that the world around him, especially in Rome, was dark and violent. He knew it needed a desperate warning about its present condition. He was not etching out a nice theory for its own sake. He was alerting to a show-down between two incompatible world views. But in the end, in Romans, he was insisting that all would be positive, **all would be love...some day**...Darkness and violence would not win out.

Paul was not working out a beautiful piece of spiritual theology for holy people in the Christian system. He was speaking to the Roman system, and he was telling them that a showdown is already occurring. The two systems are incompatible. The relationship between them is untenable. And the expression of that untenability is coming very soon. In other words, "Rome, you can't win!" It's really where even the highest level of spiritual stuff in Paul in those texts is still part of that political conviction. It's not an added-on plus.

Death, resurrection, crucifiedness, resurrectedness, curse, freedom, suffering, weakness, moronic behaviour, scandal, spirit of gentleness, and the final love.

The words change but the meaning doesn't. But to put it in that order, it's got some mileage. I see Romans beginning almost where Galatians (and the latter parts of Corinthians) finished. All was love, but love needed spelling out much more. Romans does just that.

Paul was in Ephesus, and he wrote to the Philippians from there; he then wrote to Corinth from Ephesus and somewhere in that period wrote to the Galatians. He arrived at the key idea of agape, and now – from Corinth/Cenchreae he writes his mature thoughts about it.

At the same time there is a staccato sound in his writing to Romans. He uses the fiery Greek expletive, *me genoito* (not on your...life), ten times. He repeated key phrases in which he sees much meaning and doesn't unpack it fully: he uses *dikaiousune tou theou* (justice of God) sixty times. He refers also to the anger of God, meaning that God may punish, but not with annihilating absoluteness. It would take later theology to distinguish the proper sense of the justice/mercy of God from the metaphorical sense of an anger that could be predicated of God.

THE ARGUMENT OF THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

My interest here is in the **argument** that Paul uses, step for step, throughout the whole letter. I want here to spell out the steps, following the letter point for point, and at times, chapter by chapter. I will highlight what seem to me to be the main statements, and treat lesser things in a minor way. I have not done this for the other letters: this one stands as resume of the whole Pauline corpus.

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INTRODUCTION

Before we really begin the letter, there is an '**introduction**' (1, 1-17). Paul is dealing with a revelation from God: the Father is coming to us, speaking with us, in the tenderness of a conversation. We are intertwined with God, *tete a tete*, as it were bent over a coffee table with God. The conversation is about the divine dynamic of salvation. It is at work in all of us, whoever we are, Jew or Gentile. There are two characteristics of it: **fidelity, and love**.

*First there is the unextinguishable **fidelity** of God. It is seen as far back as the unconditional promise to Abraham (rather than to any bilateral agreement or*

covenant). But it goes back to who the Eternally Faithful One has always been and will be.

Secondly, there is a **LOVE** of different kind than ours, and it is revealed in Christ who is God's dearest gift of LOVE to us all.

So fidelity, love, Abraham and Christ are going to be key terms in this letter.

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THE WORLD AND CREATION

Then **the letter really begins** (1,18-32). The **world** before Christ, and the world since Christ or lived without Christ, is the exact opposite of the God just introduced. This world was and is unfaithful and unloving. Its behavior is incompatible with faithfulness and love. Left to itself, this world was not and is not on the way of LOVE, it is rather on its own (different) way, unfaithful to its call, unloving in its living.

God tried to reveal to this world, to these people, this LOVE, and God tried to do so through creation itself. But the world refused the LOVE in all creation and would not give thanks for it. It had excessive self-confidence and invested itself in pleonexia (cupiditas – self-interested desire) and not in agape (caritas – outpoured love). That investment is the real sin. The mystery, however, is that God remained faithful, committed in fidelity, in LOVE, even to this world and to these people. [Paul is rather strong in his rhetoric against them.]

The anger of God is being revealed from heaven against all the impiety and depravity of men who keep truth imprisoned in their wickedness. For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them since God himself has made it plain. Ever since God created the world his everlasting power and deity – however invisible – have been there for the mind to see in the things he has made. That is why such people are without excuse: they knew God and yet refused to honor him as God or to thank him. Instead, they made nonsense out of logic and their empty minds were darkened. The more they called themselves philosophers, the more stupid they grew, until they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for a worthless imitation, for the image of a mortal man, of birds, of quadrupeds and reptiles. That is why God left them to their filthy enjoyments and the practices with which they dishonor their own bodies, since they have given up divine truth

for a lie and have worshipped and served creatures instead of the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen!

That is why God has abandoned them to degrading passions: why their women have turned from natural intercourse to unnatural practices and why their men folk have given up natural intercourse to be consumed with passion for each other, men doing shameful things with men and getting an appropriate reward for their perversion.

In other words, since they refused to see that it was rational to acknowledge God, God has left them to their own irrational ideas and to their monstrous behavior. And so they are steeped in all sorts of depravity, rottenness, greed and malice, and addicted to envy, murder, wrangling, treachery, and spite. Libellers, slanderers, enemies of God, rude, arrogant and boastful, enterprising in sin, rebellious to parents, without brains, honor, love or pity. They know what God's verdict is: that those who behave like this deserve to die, and yet they do it; and what is worse, encourage others to do the same. [1, 18-32]

Paul surely was angry at the way he was told that life was lived in the streets and byways of Rome.

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THE JEWS AND TORAH

The above is true **'no matter who you are'**. [2, 1-11] It applies universally, beyond Rome.

'No matter who you are' means, **even if you are a Jew**. The Jews had not only creation, but the **Torah (Law)** to guide them.

*Sinners who were not subject to Torah will perish all the same, without the Torah. Sinners who were under Torah will have Torah to judge them. It is not listening to Torah but keeping it that will make people holy in the sight of God. For instance, Gentiles who never heard of Torah but are led by reason to do what Torah commands, may not actually 'possess' Torah, but they can be said to 'live' and 'be' Torah. They can point to the substance of Torah engraved on their hearts – they can call a witness, that is, their own conscience – they have accusation and defence, that is, their **own inner mental dialogue**. [2, 12-15]*

For Paul, knowing LOVE in Christ and thanking God for it brings salvation. This is the vantage point from which Paul looks at **Gentiles**. No one can be saved without Christ or outside of Christ. There is only one access point to the flood of God's love, and it is Christ. But to be with, or in Christ is possible without knowing that you are with or in Christ (there are then Christians who do not know they are Christians). To be so, you don't have to think explicitly or consciously of Christ. You just have to have a real constancy in what is good, and to be **true inside yourself to this larger flooding LOVE**. [Then you are both a true Jew, and/or a true Christian!] This cannot happen without a **circumcision of the heart** which leads to a real openness to the largeness and universality of LOVE, and so **makes LOVE of neighbor basically possible and distance from neighbor effectively impossible..** [Without it, you can have some ordinary love for neighbor- or God - but not that LOVE.] [2,12-16 and 25-29]

To be a Jew is not just to look like a Jew, and circumcision is not just a physical operation. The real Jew is the one who is inwardly a Jew, and the real circumcision is in the heart – something not of the letter but of the spirit. A Jew like that may not be praised by man, but he will be praised by God. [2, 28-29]

So are the Jews better off? [3,1] They are 'the people to whom God's message was entrusted' [3,2] Their infidelity does not cancel out God's fidelity [3,3] We – Gentiles and Jews alike – are all under sin's domination [3,9].

No one can be justified in the sight of God by keeping Torah: all that Torah does is to tell us what is sinful. [3,20]

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THE PRINCIPLE – GRATUITOUS GIFT OF GIVEN LOVE

The key issue is that, as a result of God's integrity or fidelity to GodSelf, the LOVE that is the key to it all, is a **gratuitous gift** to all. That closes off all self-boasting, or glorying in anything you have done to earn it (even keeping Torah). So you need to re-think who you are – i.e. in good French, to re-penser or re-pent yourself. The real prayer is, God, respond to us in your Justice and your Love, not in our judgment and self-concern.

Both (Jew and Gentile) are justified through the free gift of his grace by being redeemed (included into) Christ Jesus who was appointed by God to sacrifice his life so as to win reconciliation through faith. [3,24]

Paul is thinking of the symbolism of the Jewish ritual of Yom Kippur to establish a parallel, and even more a contrast, with Christ. Yom Kippur is a ritual of pardon. Only in and through Christ could there be definitive and absolute pardon. The reason for this is that definitive and faithful love is the only source of definitive pardon. Jesus lived and died in that definitive love. Such love of its own intrinsic nature is in conflict with all the processes of death, and is intrinsically greater than any and all death, and any and all guilt and sin. [3, 19-24].

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ABRAHAM AS SYMBOL OF THE OUTRIGHT GIVENNESS OF THE GIFT

In chapter 4, Paul uses the symbolism of Abraham in the binding of Isaac, to establish the fact and principle that LOVE is greater than, and eliminative of, all forms of destruction. That is why also there is a permanence in that LOVE and we can call it the JUSTICE of God, or God's inner faithfulness to that LOVE – for God is bound to God's own outward bound bounty. That is the 'justice' of God.. 'Abraham believed that kind of God and he was located in that kind of Justice'. Faith is faith in that LOVE in its permanent and bounded bountifulness. [I will not go into the details of chapter 4 here, about Abraham. I discussed some of them in my comments on Galatians].

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THE RESPONSE – FAITH, AND A LOT MORE

This puts the focus on faith. Paul however in Romans goes further than a focus on 'faith'. He does not describe the essential salvific or Christian experience as one of faith, but as one of being 'in peace'. In that peace there is also freedom, and a daring ability to act with positivity (parrhesia). And yet, that LOVE is experienced in the manifold expressions of weakness that make up our daily lives. [5, 1-5]

So far, then, we have seen that, through our Lord Jesus Christ, by faith we are judged righteous and at peace with God, since it is by faith and through Jesus that we have entered this state of grace in which we can boast about looking forward to God's glory. But that is not all we can boast about; we can boast about our sufferings. These sufferings bring patience, as we know, and patience brings

perseverance, and perseverance brings hope, and this hope is not deceptive, because the LOVE of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given us. We were still helpless when at his appointed moment Christ died for sinful men. It is not easy to die even for a good man – though of course for someone really worthy, a man might be prepared to die – but what proves that God LOVES us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Having died to make us righteous, is it likely that he would now fail to save us from God’s anger? When we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, we were still enemies; now that we have been reconciled, surely we may count on being saved by the (risen) life of his Son? Not merely because we have been reconciled but because we are filled with joyful trust in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have already gained our reconciliation. [5,1-11]

Here Paul is interested in spelling out the **conditions of possibility** for this experience ‘in peace’. His assumption is that Christ is alive ‘in sinu ecclesiae’, and that means really in the (circumcised) heart of each person, that is, ‘in me’ and in the circumcised activity of each church community. .

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A CONTRAST MODEL - ‘ADAM’

To spell out the conditions of possibility, he uses a **contrast model**. It is the largely received (at the time) Jewish persuasion about ‘Adam’ and ‘Adam’s’ influence on all humanity. They thought in terms of an inclusion of all in Adam and of a solidarity of all in Adam. Because of that deep involvement of all in this one, this one could have an influence on the whole human race. Paul, without necessarily agreeing with this picture, sets it up as a rhetorical backdrop for his claim that Christ is the **only man who ever did or could exercise truly universal influence for good on all humanity and on the whole world**. The reason is the same as above. **Only he has loved with that large LOVE**. So, in relation to the first creation and to Adam, mirabilis reformasti (you have re-modeled us more marvelously), and Christ is the new and real and only ADAM. The meaning of being human is to be flooded with that LOVE (manifested in Christ loving us sinners) and live it. [5, 12-21] [To speak of a ‘second’ Adam means to speak of ‘the real one’.]

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BAPTISM AND BEING IN CHRIST

The meaning of being in Christ now, or being in that Love now, is something very stable. We are literally immersed ('baptized') in the act of love in which he died, or better, as a result of which he overcame death by resurrection. That love in him was so contrary to death and all that goes with it that all of that was eliminated forever. [This is the foundation for Paul's use of syn-verbs to describe our live and activity 'with' Christ...] [6, 1-11]

You have been taught that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized in his death; in other words, when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him, and joined with him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life (with him).

If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection. We must realize that our former selves have been crucified with him to destroy this sinful body and to free us from the slavery of sin. When a man dies, of course, he has finished with sin.

But we believe that having died with Christ we shall return to life with him: Christ, as we know, having been raised from the dead will never die again. Death has no power over him any more. When he died, he died, once for all, to sin. So his life now is life with God. And in that way, you too must consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus. [6,3-11]

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A RESIDUAL REALISM, BUT STILL THE PRINCIPLE OF GIVEN LOVE

But Paul – in chapter 7 - is **at least partly a realist**. He knows that the old man, with its mortal body, with its self-centeredness, is still there, and it is the very opposite of the new man of disinterested LOVE. Yet he insists that the **new LOVE is engraved into our hearts**. [In Hebrew, the word harit means engraving; the word herit means freedom – and Hebrew doesn't put much value on vowels anyway!] [6, 12-14 and 7, 2-3]

AND SO – A NEW MORAL THEOLOGY

To get a balance between LOVE and Law, Paul then plays with the word 'law' (in ways, I think, that we would not want to...). He is thinking of Torah (Law)

but his thought includes all law. Is Christ, or life in Christ, the accomplishment of all Law? He comes up with a rather daring moral principle. **Only when any law stops imposing itself from the outside on a person, can it become an interior demand within the person...and so 'oblige' the person..** When it becomes interior, we today would probably not want to still call it 'law'. Paul does! But he has more to say about it....

For Paul, no law can ever articulate a context adequate to the unlimited outpouring of Love.

Paul then moves from 'law' to 'commandments'. Paul goes on to talk, not of the commandments in the plural, but of **the one commandment in the singular**. The one commandment is that of LOVE. That commandment is accomplished in us, but not by us even then. It is accomplished in us, not observed by us. What we need to develop is an inner docility to it, accomplishing itself in us – an inner docility that is part and parcel of the inner peace. We do experience it, but only as first fruits of what will come to us later.... [8,4-13]

We are talking at all points about the most disinterested LOVE conceivable, even by God. That is why it is universal, and for all. **The Father communicated to the human will of Jesus his Son a degree of love such that he would wish of his own freewill to take up the cause of the poor, and as a result to undergo the passion...believing that the Love would take him through death into resurrection.** This is a love that the LOVE of the Father was working in his Son. That is why the Father was well-pleased and took delight in his Son. For us now, this same unsuspected fullness of LOVE abides as a living freedom when we meet new focuses of love, in needy people around us, daily. [8,15-16 and 31-39]

Christ, loving like this, then takes the place of Law – Christ in the neighbor takes the place of all Law. What we need in practice is **humility before the neighbor**, in Christ. [as he will say in 12, 1-2]

Think of God's mercy, my brothers, and worship him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy of thinking beings, by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God. Do not model yourself on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind. That is the only way to discover the will of God, and know what is good, what it is that God wants, what is the perfect thing to do. [12,1-2]

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A VISION OF A LARGER PROVIDENCE – THE QUESTION OF ISRAEL

In chapters 9-10-11 Paul looks at **the question of Israel in God's providence**. He cannot speak of Israel without sorrow and mental anguish, since he has the warmest love for Israel, and would even wish to be cut out of Christ to help Israel (if that would help). Israel has been the recipient of the greatest gifts: filiation, glory, covenant, Torah, ritual, promises, descent from the patriarchs, having Christ come from their flesh and blood. They are still the chosen people. They are still loved by God, who never takes back his gifts or revokes them. So: has God kept his promise to Israel? We need to distinguish those physically descended from Israel, from the real children of the promise. Not all of them are. We then need to focus on the real, the true Israel. This group is set up by another free choice of God (just as in scripture, God chooses the younger over the older, Jacob over Esau). That choice from God is indeed free and outreaching to the less deserving. God fulfills the promise in a new and free way. This is to show the 'mercy-dimension' of LOVE, and to insist that the only thing that counts is the **free mercy of God**. In allowing some (many) in physical Israel to not-believe, God wants to extend the mercy to others outside of physical Israel. In that way we now are the ones God has so called – whether we are in public terms Jews or Gentiles.

God allowed some (many) Jews to rely on their own good deeds instead of on trusting in faith, and thus have a misguided zeal. Didn't they have a preacher of the real way? They did. Didn't they hear the message? They did. Did God reject them? Of course not. God chose from them a remnant, a chosen few, and the remnant is the true Israel. But remember: it is the remnant 'of Israel'.

Have the many in Israel fallen forever or just stumbled? The latter. Their fall has made it possible for God to save the Gentiles. As the Gentiles believe and receive the promise, the Jews are rightly envious. This is meant to lead the Jews back into the promise. The whole pattern of history was to allow God in due time to show mercy to all mankind, to Jews first, to Gentiles then, to Jews once again, and so to all finally. In due time, and there is time that yet remains...

Underlying all his thought here, is Paul's conviction that a divided heart is not a heart set free, and cannot really sing the song of freedom. While there are Jews at odds with others, the Jewish heart cannot sing. It has to learn polyphony. It has to learn the music of Miryam after a larger exodus than the one from Egypt. When it does, there will be one heart, undivided, living one circumcision of the

heart, singing with a whole heart and mind and strength that its Lord's plan was always One.

Note. Paul called himself an 'abortion'. The English word here does not fully convey the Greek (ektroma). The Greek means a child born in traumatic conditions, weaker than other children, whose delivery caused the death of his mother. This can be heard metaphorically. It was Mother Israel that gave birth to Paul, the Jew who saw the whole point of Israel in the light of the Risen One, and whose vision caused somehow the hardness of heart (death) of many in Mother Israel.

So we come to the **great hymn** of 11, 33-36

How rich are the depths of God – how deep his wisdom and knowledge – and how impossible to penetrate his motives or understand his methods! 'Who could ever know the mind of the Lord? Who could ever be his counselor? Who could ever give him anything or lend him anything?' All that exists comes from him; all is by him and for him.

And Paul has rewritten the Shema....

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GOODBYE – IT IS ALL MERCY

After this, the remaining chapters are exhortative, and form a kind of epilogue to the letter. At the beginning of chapter 12 Paul sums up **the implications of his 'mercy' insight**:

Think of God's mercy...and worship God in a way worthy of thinking beings, by offering your living bodies as a holy sacrifice, truly pleasing to God. Let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind. [12, 1-2]

He tells his followers not to exaggerate their own importance, and to expect diversity in gifts and in performance. He wants agape without retributive justice. He even accepts the civic legitimacy of the Roman Empire – while he continues to say that his disciples ought not to model themselves on the way those in such authority use it. He refuses to be judgmental. He comes up with a resume of **his own 'special position'** among them:

'a liturgist of Jesus Christ, to carry out my priestly duty by bringing the Good News from God to the Gentiles, and so make them acceptable as an offering, made holy by the Holy Spirit [15, 16]

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GOOD-DAY – IT IS A NEW LIFE FOR YOU

It all goes back to Paul's experience of Jesus' resurrection. That experience was 'out of time', but he translated its meaning into time frames. That meant, he believed that the kingdom of God was now coming very soon, closer than even Jesus and John the Baptist had consciously thought and hoped. He was confirmed in this, because he also saw evidence of its coming in his Gentile converts. He saw that they were given the Spirit (with charismatic gifts). Spirit is a charged dynamic category that changes the identity and character of people. Charismata were a mystery to people at that time, and indicated some special divine activity. With the Spirit and the charisms, Paul's converts were not just 'pure', they were no longer 'common', and indeed they were positively 'holy' (sanctified: hagios, kodesh). That means that God was giving them entrée to the divine presence in its most sacred locations, such as the inner sanctum of the temple. Paul saw this, and re-read the prophets in the Jewish scriptures, where it is said that when this happens the eschata (the ultimate things) are on the doorstep. As a result of the Spirit in them, these Gentile Christians are immediately prepared for the coming of the eschata. They are already set aside by God from other 'ordinary-common' Gentiles (pagans). They were suited to the zone of holiness represented by the Jerusalem temple. In other words, we are not dealing simply with random gifts of the Spirit to individuals. The temple, the holy of holies in it, the ritual space of the temple, were expanded by God into all these people, wherever they were. The Greek-Roman universe itself, where these people lived, became an extension of the temple precincts. [Remember that in the whole lifetime of Paul, the temple in Jerusalem stood.] In this light, Paul saw that the idols are useless, and the only things to do with them was bury them! [Paul not only takes on the Roman Empire as a false religion, he imagines and dreams of a transformed Roman Empire internally changed by the presence and behavior of his inspired converts.]

An inspired Gentile Christian could sin. It was not sin against the Jewish Torah. It was sin against the gift of holiness given to him or her in this Spirit way. Jews had a concept of sin, and used temple blood sacrifices to remove it. Pagan Gentiles had a concept of 'sin' against one of the lower gods, or idols, and

then they used some form of pagan sacrifice, in a pagan temple, to remove that sin. Note that Paul's inspired gentiles did not use either the Jewish temple rituals, nor the pagan ones, for this purpose. They had a real reconciliation with the expanding God who was present among them in their Christian community. They did not use the Eucharist they then took part in, as a substitute for a Jewish temple sacrifice. But you could see it as a substitute, in some way, for a pagan temple sacrifice.

He then says 'he has **no more work to do here**' and dreams of Spain....

End of the letter to the Romans.

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LOOKING AT SOME DISTINCTIVE THEOLOGICAL POINTS

In Romans, Paul changes subtly some of his earlier explicit themes. It is good to list a few of them. Cf. Philip Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: the Social Setting of Paul's Letter*, Fortress Press, 2003.

The Christian community at Rome was divided by ethnic conflict. It was a mix of Jews and Gentiles. Paul had tried to mediate in a similar situation among the Galatians. The positions taken in Galatians are not the same as those taken in Romans. There is a large development in Paul's language by the time he writes Romans.

In Galatians, Paul was opposing Judean **outsiders** on behalf of Gentile converts. In **Romans**, he was reconciling Judean and Gentile **insiders**.

In Galatians, he urged the abolition of **ethnic difference**. 'In Christ there is neither Judean nor Greek', Gal 3,28.

In **Romans**, he did not: he **wanted ethnic difference to remain**, but he wanted those who were ethnically different to have equal status together in different ways. The quote above is the last thing he wanted for the Romans...

In Galatians, baptism abolishes ethnic boundaries.

In **Romans**, it doesn't. Through it, both Judeans and Gentiles escape the power of sin. But in different ways. The Judeans **die to the law**. The Gentiles **die to ungodliness** (impurity and lawlessness).

In Galatians, **Abraham** is the ancestor of the uncircumcised (3,6-9), and his **seed** is Christ.

In **Romans**, Abraham is the ancestor of the circumcised and the uncircumcised, and his seed is both together.

In Galatians, righteousness was **never theoretically possible** by observing the law.

In **Romans**, **in fact no one** has observed the law enough to be righteous by it.

In Galatians, freedom means **liberation from the law**.

In **Romans**, freedom means **liberation from sin**.

In Galatians, the **law is an active agent in confining Israel to sin**. God too used the law for that end, so that she may be saved by faith. [God is perverse?]

In **Romans**, the law is either passive or has **nothing to do with it**. God gave the law unto righteousness and life, but sin foiled God's intent, and the only rescue can then be through faith. [God is incompetent?]

In Galatians, divine Sonship comes from liberation from the **law**.

In **Romans**, divine Sonship is a reason for living by the **Spirit**.

In Galatians, the Spirit is in contrast with the flesh, the law, and those who are circumcised and observe the law.

In **Romans**, the Spirit is in contrast with the flesh only. The **Spirit is now law-like**.

In Galatians, the promises to Israel were limited by time, and that time has **elapsed**.

In **Romans**, the promises to Israel are **still being fulfilled, but in an unexpected way**.

In Galatians, Israel is the Christ-group (and vice-versa).

In **Romans**, Israel is Israel, i.e. ethnic Israel, **not a spiritualized (Christian) Israel**.

In Galatians, believers are baptized **into Christ** (clothed with Christ), as in mystery initiation rites.

In **Romans**, believers are baptized into Christ's **death** (Rm 6).

In **Romans**, Paul thinks that Israel was allowed to drop out of the covenant only so that the whole world might enter 'the redemption that is in Christ Jesus'. Israel's drop out was then not an accident. But it is not a permanent obliteration.

Note: Paul uses the expression 'body of Christ'. In Cor it is a simple moral unity, of which the body is a metaphor. In Gal it is a unity that effaces all religious and social distinctions, so there is neither Jew nor Greek. In Rm he goes further: he sees an identification with the one person of Christ. He does not say in Rm that there is one body which is Christ, but that there is 'one sole body in the Christ', in which each is member to the other. [12, 3-5]

Ed Sanders in a very recent article (Did Paul's theology develop?, in The Word leaps the Gap, festschrift for Richard Hays, 2008), suggests that there is neither inconsistency nor real change in Paul's thinking, but sometimes a change in language. He moves from 'having the Spirit' to 'living in the Spirit'; from 'faith in Christ' to 'dying with Christ, and one in Christ'; from 'enduring without blame' to 'being enriched and transformed'; from 'imitate' to 'share in'; from 'having roles in the body of Christ' to 'being one with the person of Christ'. The main insight into non-exclusive universalism remains, with a predilection for Israel. The God of Israel is the God of the whole world, and all creation is his; he sent his Son Jesus to save the whole world...

CONCEPTS WHERE SCHOLARS STILL WRESTLE WITH ROMANS

The Law.

James Dunn argues that Paul was not opposed to the ethical section of the Torah, only to a universal demand of its Jewish cultural symbols of demarcation.

Philip Esler argues that for Paul, the very best that the Torah could provide (in its ethical section) is now available by a different route – the Spirit. The moral demands of the law no longer have any role for Christians.

To speak, as Paul does, of the 'law of Christ' or the 'law of the Spirit' is to use metaphorical inversion. The **actual law has been superseded**, not redefined around different parameters. It is 100% obsolete as a binding force for Christians.

The Covenant.

Tom Wright argues that for Paul, Christ is the 'climax of the covenant'. I.e., the goal of the law more than the removal of it. Its natural result.

Philip Esler argues that for Paul, Christ liberated Israel from the mess the law had produced. There is radical discontinuity between the Mosaic law and Christ. Esler even suggests that we **drop the term 'salvation history'**. We have a period between Abraham and Paul when the promise was not fulfilled by anyone, it is in futuro only. The centuries between Moses and Christ comprised a period of unrelieved gloom. No one in Israelite history had the faith-righteousness of Abraham. Abraham (alone) is an exception to the rule in a faithless era. Paul is thinking like an apocalyptic convert.

Summary.

Paul had experienced nothing but joy and righteousness under the law. He had been blameless by it. In hindsight he now understands that it was a pseudo-righteousness. He sees the era of the covenant as a dark age. He sees Abraham as a faith-figure who anticipated things better than the law to come.

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I think there is an **intuitive** level in Paul's thinking in Romans. For Jews, the Torah was always the **locus of parenesis** (the place from which those who exhorted Jews to be faithful Jews found their arguments, the place from which Jews chose symbols that helped them live in a Jewish way). In Rm, Paul disconnects Torah from that role. He thinks the resurrection of Jesus is that locus of parenesis, not only for Jews or for particular Gentile cultures, but for all who are human. For Paul in Rm, to be in the people of God is to be resurrection people. Covenant hope is resurrection hope. The ultimate results of staying in the covenant people is not a sense of having kept Torah, or of being a dead observant Jew, but the experience of being raised from the dead as Jesus was, i.e. the experience of being a crucified-risen person 'in' Jesus..

On this basis, Paul then does some **cognitive** work. He argues – almost phenomenologically - that sin and death are beyond the reach of Torah (or any law) or the capacity of Torah (or any law) to deal with. Natural man is the source of sin and death. Torah, holy in itself, was given to natural man, but only a holy, inspired man could keep it. This means that there is a universal human history (of natural man, sin and death) that is truly universal – it is not contained within the particular story of Israel. Paul then argues, theologically, that if God is just and faithful (righteous), God's justice must reach out and remedy the evil

in that whole universal human story. God's justice must reach beyond Israel. It must express itself in a larger truly universal arena. That for Paul can only be the arena of the resurrection of Jesus. God can't 'do' God's kind of justice without a new arena for it – a new creation set up by Jesus' resurrection; nor without a new people for and among whom this justice is done – Jews and Gentiles together believing in this resurrection.

Paul is then dealing with **political** dilemmas. If God does that, is God then being just to Israel? Has God abandoned Judaism? Have believers in Jesus' resurrection outside of Israel become the true people of God, leaving Israel outside the true people of God?

The agenda of Romans is a **mix** of these intuitive, cognitive and political points. They come up in an unsystematic way as Paul's convictions pour out of him.

He seems to me to be saying that the symbol-system of Israel (Torah etc) has indeed been succeeded by the symbol-system of Jesus (crucified-risen). Only the latter now is the true source of **parenesis** for and in God's people – humans, whoever they are. But he is also saying that it is not possible to understand, or to savour, the full meaning of the Jesus-thing (crucified-risen) without the help of the symbol-system of Israel. It remains as the necessary (yes, necessary for all people) **hermeneusis** of what Jesus did. [We can't understand Jesus' Passover except in terms of the Jewish Passover.] Gentile believers in Jesus are asked to live the Jesus-life, understood in terms of the Israel-life. For example, God is truly as universal as humanity (and cosmically more), but God cannot be understood except through an appreciation of the God of Israel. For example, God is a God of fidelity and justness, universally, in an outreaching way, but God in this capacity cannot be understood except in terms of the story of God's covenant fidelity to Israel – which still stands and is not just a memory of something passé. Israel of old had two roles: one to be THE locus of parenesis for Israelites at that time, the other to be THE locus of hermeneusis for everyone at all times. In the former role, Israel has indeed been succeeded by Jesus, crucified and risen. In the latter role, Israel has not and will never be succeeded by any other interpretive system.

A good example of this is the parenetic centrality of the 'circumcised heart' in Paul: you can't understand it without the Jewish background about 'circumcision'.

I have come to sense that one of the problems in reading Romans, is the failure of the later church (after Paul), to accept that and to live along those lines. It has in public politics presented itself as not needing the symbol system of Israel to interpret its Jesus. Me genoito! Paul might exclaim. (Greek for: Not on your... life...)

In Rm, Paul has actually found an integration of Jew and non-Jew. It is a major vision.

It is based on the **distinction between paretic and hermeneutic**. The former is exhortation into deeper living, the latter is exploration into deeper meaning. The exhortation comes from a basic story with its key symbols, the latter uses a wider story and a larger horizon of symbols. Paul longs for the day, in the future, when all Israel will see the resurrection of Jesus as the hermeneutical core of its own symbol system, and when all believers, Gentile and Jew, will take up 'the resurrection of Israel in Jesus' as their one and only paretic.

Commentators look for 'the central question', the 'overarching theme', the 'real key' to Romans. I am not sure if there is a single one...or one driving question. Perhaps there is a key-chain. Romans is about resurrection, about Torah, about God's faithfulness... The resurrection of Jesus affects Israel's story: what God's justice really is, why we ought to act righteously, how creation is restored, and how Israel itself is restored or better never loses its real role.

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I wonder how a man like Paul can keep a paretic focus one way and a hermeneutic focus another way. I think it might be because his real focus is on something or someone that transcends that binary option.... That allows him maximum positivity in regard to ALL views where opinion might be divided. He can hold a benign view, but be open to another view at the same time! That 'someone' was a Risen Jew!

I have presented Paul here in terms of **the guiding motif of LOVE, and seen that as Paul's ultimate antidote to the Empire situation he lived in.** [For that reason I have used Stanislaus Lyonnet in reading Romans, and Dominic Crossan in reading its context.]

It seems to me that Paul in Romans has given a complete theological rationale for living out of the inspiration of the resurrection of Jesus. In this, Paul completes

the 'Christian hermeneutic' he developed in Corinthians. With a Jewish hermeneutic and a resurrectional parenthesis.

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