



Faith, Law, and Redemption in Jesus and Paul:
Reformation Themes and Christian-Jewish Relations

Geloof, wet en verlossing bij Jezus en Paulus:
de Reformatie-thematiek en
de christelijk-joodse verhouding

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Reading Chapters 9–11 as the Centre of Romans: Historical Criticism, Reformation Theology, and Jewish- Christian Relations

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1. Paul's World

Before doing anything else, we must try to grasp that Paul lived in a very different world from ours. I do not mean that we travel in airplanes and use smartphones, whereas he took the boat and wrote letters. And fortunately he did, for the emails and apps of our world will pass, but his letters remain with us for ages.

What I mean is a world in which Judaism was well established either in Judea or in the various diasporas while being centred on the temple in Jerusalem. This world disappeared with the destruction of the temple in 70 CE ending the first revolt of the Jews against the Romans and with the devastation and de-Judaization of Judea after the second revolt ending in 135/136. In the world that replaced it, rabbinic Judaism and gentile Christianity became ideologically opposed communities, even though Jews and Christians kept finding many ways of interacting at grassroot level. Jewish Christians had become an ideological anomaly, rejected by the Jews and not really accepted by the Christians. That has become our world, either with boats and letters or with airplanes and smartphones. It is very difficult for us to imagine that other world of Paul.

In Paul's world, the Jerusalem temple with its ruling priestly elite represented a basis of stability that allowed for enormous diversity in Jewish life and hence for widely differing interpretations of the Tora. Paul's conversion meant that he changed from being a Jew

overly zealous for the law into a Jew believing in Jesus as Messiah, while at the same time there were many Jews who were neither so 'zealous' for the law nor believed in Jesus. And for all of them, one way or another the temple was the centre of their life and the Tora its charter. Acts reports that this was also true of the infant church in Jerusalem and of Paul himself, and the Qumran scrolls show that it even went for the Essenes, although their exceeding zeal for the law excluded going to the temple as it was run by Sadducees and Pharisees.

Nevertheless we read halfway Acts – at about the time when Paul must have been writing the letters we have – that the climate in Judea was changing and ancient 'zeal' about the law was on the rise. This will occupy us later.

2. Struggling for a Historical Perspective

The approach called 'historical criticism' involves reading the Bible as a collection of historical documents. It does not at all need to exclude other ways of reading the Bible, such as devotional reading or reading in the context of the liturgy. But for scholarly purposes, historical criticism is the main approach on the Bible (taken in a large sense also including literary analysis). Paul's letter to the Romans should be no exception and should be read in its historical setting, not in the framework of the catechism or of systematic theology. Thus Ferdinand Christian Baur in a landmark article on Romans published in 1836.¹

Exegetes widely acclaim Baur's approach, but they are having a hard time applying it to Romans. This is not because his article consists of heavy German sentences in Gothic print. It is because Romans has come to be viewed as the 'compendium of Christian faith' and it is very difficult to part with that view. The phrase was coined by Melancthon, Luther's co-worker, and the idea behind it is typical of Protestant biblical scholarship.² There is a vicious circle here: Romans continues to be read in the framework of church doctrine, because it is viewed as the summary of Christian, especially Protestant, faith. Reading Romans in an adequate historical perspective is especially difficult for Protestants.

An important asset of Baur's article is his argument that chapters 9-11 are central in Romans. Thus he points to the rhetoric of the opening verses, 'I have a great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart ... for the sake of my own people' (9:2). It is the most emotional passage in the entire letter, and it indicates that the author now introduces his most important subject. These insights are shared by prominent recent exegetes.³ Baur's main error must also be mentioned. It is his idea that Rom 9-11, in line with the long introduction in chapters 1-8, is directed against the 'Jewish particularism' propagated by the Jewish Christians in Rome.⁴ Rather, it is the other way around: it is directed against gentile Christian particularism.

The Protestant difficulty in reading Romans was exemplified in the dispute between Stendahl and Käsemann in the 1960s and 70s. Krister Stendahl, a Swedish bishop and Harvard professor, published an article explaining that the 'guilty conscience' typical of Western Christianity does not derive from Paul but was in fact the product of Luther's reading of Romans. Paul had badly sinned as a persecutor of the church, but otherwise he had a 'robust conscience'. His considerations in Romans about 'law', 'sin', and 'justification by faith' should not be read as a general theory on the human predicament and the core of his theology, but in view of the issue at hand: the relation between Jews and gentiles in the church of Rome. In that light, Stendahl wrote, 'Rom. 9-11 is not an appendix to chs. 1-8, but the climax of the letter.'⁵

Stendahl's article provoked a vivid reaction from Ernst Käsemann, a chief representative of the school of Rudolf Bultmann. In a published lecture which begins gallantly, 'Controversy is the breath of life to a German theologian', he came strongly in support of the Protestant doctrine of justification. He thought that Stendahl, in the following of Baur, viewed Paul's justification doctrine in Romans as no more than a polemical tool against Judaism. Käsemann was aware of his curious position: 'It is not without irony that it is left to radical historical criticism, as represented by the Bultmann school, to defend the Reformed heritage.'⁶

Some years later, Käsemann's commentary on Romans appeared, revealing the background to his allergic reaction on Stendahl. For Käsemann, Baur, the pioneer of historical criticism, had restored the letter to the Romans to its historical setting, correctly showing that chapters 9-11 are the main section. But in doing so, he also removed the doctrine of justification by faith from its central place in Protestant theology. This was one bridge too far for most – including Käsemann, it seems. Hence the 'schizophrenia' of Pauline scholarship: Baur's approach is adopted, but not his insight that chapters 9-11 are the centre of Romans.⁷

In a response to Käsemann, Stendahl stipulated that he did not view Paul's teaching on justification as a 'fighting doctrine directed against Judaism'. Paul had a positive attitude to the Jewish law, and the aim of his justification doctrine was to defend 'the right of gentile converts to be full members of the people of God'.⁸ If we want to understand Paul better in an open relation to Judaism, I suggest we should go with Stendahl, not Käsemann.

3. Developments in Rome and Judea

We must now try to get a view on the historical context of Romans, about 58 CE. Most commentators accept the likelihood that by that time, Jewish Christians were returning to Rome as the edict of Claudius that had banned them from the city some ten years earlier was losing its force.⁹ It is important to note that Romans explicitly and formally addresses the gentile Christians in Rome (Rom 11:13, cf. 1:15). In that light it is significant that the readers, being the 'strong' ones, must welcome the 'weak' in their midst along with their peculiar diet and calendar customs (Rom 14:2-6). Since the Church Fathers, commentators have recognised this as an appeal to welcome the Jewish Christians.¹⁰ Thus it seems probable that since Claudius' edict, the gentile Christians had developed a life of their own, in which it seemed difficult to re-admit their Jewish brothers and sisters.¹¹

Concurrently, the situation developing in Judea was likely to have its influence. By the mid-fifties CE, there was a climate of growing unrest and violence. The story of Josephus to that effect is confirmed both by Paul's exposé in Gal 1 and 2 and by Acts.¹² Acts and Josephus even use some similar sources relating to this period, both mentioning the insurrections led by Judas and Theudas and the murders committed by the *sicarii*, terrorist Jewish 'dagger-men'. Underlying seems to have been a deep resentment against the Roman occupiers with their taxes and the religious styling of their power, and, in response, a renewed 'zeal for the law' and for circumcision. Acts and Galatians indicate that this development created great problems for Paul's apostolate to the gentiles, as a number of Jewish Christians were drawn into it and started to insist on circumcision of gentile believers.

This situation must have transpired to Rome. Although in Acts 28:21 the Jewish leaders in Rome say to Paul they have not received any damaging information on his account, it is likely that news about developments in Judea had reached the city. In Rom 15:30-32 Paul, underway to Jerusalem with the money of the collection, shows himself apprehensive about

‘the unbelievers in Judea’, without explaining this. His readers seem to know that in Judea, a climate of violence and zeal for the law was on the rise.

Thus it seems that when writing to Rome, Paul was facing a complex situation that required an intricate argument. On the one hand, he needed to persuade the gentile Christians that they must re-admit the Jewish Christians again in their midst, cumbersome habits and all. On the other hand, he needed to distance himself from the zealous Jews and Jewish Christians, assuring his gentile Christian readers that ‘all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’, and ‘there will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek’ (Rom 3:23; 2:9). In my assessment, the long and cautiously balanced argument of Romans is understandable from this double jeopardy. In that sense, Romans is the least ‘normal’ of Paul’s letters.

4. ‘Reformation Themes’ as Paul means them

In light of the preceding, it is mistaken to view the well-known motto of Romans as Paul’s universal catch-phrase: ‘The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek’ (Rom 1:16). The emphasis, ‘to the Jew first’, is exceptional and found nowhere else in his letters. Hardly a surprise that Marcion, who a century later successfully preached an anti-Jewish Paul, wanted to get rid of that hated phrase, ‘the Jew *first*’. Ironically, he seems to have left it in place in chapter 2, just cited, where Paul repeats the motto. You cannot be too much of a heretic!

Nor should we overlook the fact that the key phrase of Romans that appears in the next sentence, ‘righteousness through faith’, is not typical of Paul’s thought as a whole either. True, it is central to Protestant theology, but not to Paul’s letters. It only seems so because we have made Romans into his main letter and read it as a universal handbook of faith. Paul hardly uses the phrase in other letters except a couple of times in Galatians, addressing a different situation.¹³ It is not even a theological concept in the strict sense. Rather, it is a condensed reference to Scripture.

Paul needs it in the two front struggle of Romans, enabling him to address ‘the Jew first but also the Greek’ right from the start in the continuation of the motto: ‘For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith”’ (1:17). Here we have Scripture behind the phrase: Hab 2:4, a verse well-known among ancient Jews for its unifying potential. The Qumran people used it to express fidelity to their spiritual leader in doing the Tora, and the rabbis, to roll up all the commandments of the Tora into one single word.¹⁴ Paul uses a known scriptural link, applying it in a unique way ‘to the Jew first, and also the Greek’.

From here, we can see a connecting thread running through the letter.¹⁵ The theme resurfaces in the summary at the end of chapter 3, ‘Since God is one ... he will justify (or, make righteous) the circumcised out of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith’ (3:30). This is elaborated in the great chapter on Abraham, taking in another verse that combines the words ‘faith’ or ‘belief’ and ‘righteousness’: ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’ (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). Abraham was circumcised after he had come to believe, so he could become both ‘the father of all who believe without being circumcised and ... of the circumcised who ... follow his example of faith’ (Rom 4:10-12). After a recap – ‘since we are justified out of faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (5:1) – four chapters follow that elaborate the relationship between Adam and Christ, sin and death, law and sin, flesh and spirit. In the tradition of Luther, these chapters are inevitably read as a general description of the human plight that must precede

redemption.¹⁶ This is not completely erroneous, but we must see how the chapters function in their context: as a diversion between the fundamental chapters 3-4 and 9-11.

For the main theme of 'justification through faith' significantly reappears in what we now have learned to consider the central section of Romans: chapters 9-11 which deal with the question of Israel's salvation in relation to that of the gentiles. It has a characteristic three part structure found more often in Paul:¹⁷

A. general introduction of the subject (9:1-29);¹⁸

B. digression, in this case on the 'justification by faith' (9:30-10:2);

A'. head-on treatment of the subject, Israel's salvation and the gentiles (11:1-36).

[Normally, the digression in the middle has the function of opening the horizon and offering fresh motivations before squarely taking on the subject. In this particular case, its subject matter dovetails with the preceding eight chapters. Thus we have the unusual situation that the main part of the letter, chapters 9-11, includes a motivating digression that has been elaborately prepared in chapters 1-8. This makes it understandable why many consider 1-8 the main part of the letter, reading it as a theological treatise on justification by faith, and 9-11 an appendix on the special subject of God's predestination. However, they thus overlook the connecting thread that runs from the extraordinary motto of the letter.]

Thus we are led from the extraordinary opening motto to 9-11 as the central part, in particular to its digression in the middle. It opens with a series of laden statements about Israel's striving for a righteousness 'of their own' and 'based on the law', while gentiles, not striving for righteousness, have found 'righteousness through faith'. For 'Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes' (Rom 9:30-10:4).

Once again, these statements should not be taken as timeless pronouncements on the nature of Judaism, but heard in the live context of Paul's world. Read as a whole, Rom 9-11 gives the impression that Paul keeps an eye on actual events in Rome and Judea, viewing them in the apocalyptic perspective of God's history with Israel and the gentiles. Thus when he writes that Israel has established its own righteousness based on the law, we are led to think of the growing number of Jews who were zealous for the law and pressed for circumcision. More explicitly addressing the actual situation in the third part (A'), Rom 11:25f. reveals the 'mystery' of Israel's 'hardening for a part'¹⁹ and the future salvation of 'all Israel' after the 'full number of gentiles have come in'. Thus viewed, these sentences are more of a reading of events actually happening than a timeless categorization of human behaviour.

5. Israel's Stance at Sinai

We have seen how phrases familiar to us as 'Reformation themes' function quite differently within Paul's argument in Romans. One point to be made is that Paul does not focus on personal salvation in a universalistic framework, as is done in Protestant confessions and theologies. He focusses on the people of Israel and the body of Christ and their respective place in the biblical perspective of salvation history, and only in that connection on personal salvation.²⁰ This becomes even more compelling once we perceive a 'midrashic' link that underlies these main chapters and colours them as a whole.

The opening verses of both Rom 9 and 11 refer to two incisive Old Testament stories in which the people of Israel fall into grievous sin while the prophet stands before God on top of Sinai, also known as Horeb. It is an example among others where Paul structures his argument by means of scriptural references.²¹ At the same time, being an achieved biblicist, he offers profound insights into the narratives involved.

In Rom 11:1-6, the reference is overt, using standardised quotation formulas. The story is about Elijah who condemns his people because they persecute the prophets including himself and only he is left to serve the God of Israel. Paul reveals the irony in God's answer to Elijah: 'I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal' (Rom 11:4, cf 1 Kgs 19). Although Paul does not cite the continuation, we might miss the point if we ignore it: Elijah is ordered not only to go away and anoint two kings, but also to anoint Elishah as prophet *instead of himself*.

In Rom 9:3-4, the reference is discreet, merely alluding to the story of Moses.²² Paul writes, 'I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh.' This recalls the Exodus story, where Moses says to God on Sinai, 'This people has sinned a great sin ... If you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written' (Exod 32:31f.). Of course Paul could not present himself as another Moses, yet he identifies with Moses' position. Moses interceded for Israel, and God changed his mind and granted Israel salvation.

Thus in Rom 9-11 Paul casts his exposé about Israel's salvation as the scene of Israel standing before Sinai, a scene found frequently both in the Bible and in Jewish midrash and prayer. As we find it also in a midrash, the prophets Paul refers to take different positions: Elijah stands against Israel, Moses by them.²³ Like Moses, Paul stands by Israel, confident of God's grace, even if they sin.

A rabbinic saying expresses a similar idea: 'Every assembly for the sake of heaven shall endure, but when it is not for the sake of heaven, it shall not endure. What is such an assembly for the sake of heaven? That is the assembly of our fathers before Sinai...'²⁴ Even if they sin, God grants them salvation, because their heart is directed towards heaven.

Yet another instance of such an inclusive vision is found in Acts, probably written by Paul's co-worker Luke. Here, it is the Pharisee Gamaliel pleading for the Apostles: 'If this plan or this undertaking is of humans, it will fail; but if it is of God, you cannot overthrow it – or you might be fighting against God!' (Acts 5:39f.). Sinai is not involved here, but the Church's stance before God is analogous to Israel's.

Finally, allow me to step out of my scholarly habitat and offer some conclusions for present-day relations between Jews and Christians. Chapters 9-11 of Paul's extraordinary letter to the Romans generate profound lessons. Paul evokes Israel's stance at Sinai, appealing to the biblically-derived phrase of 'justification by faith' and telling gentile Christians not to interfere. Even if Israel partially sins, God stands by them in the end. In turn, this refers us to Acts, where Gamaliel tells the Jewish leaders not to intervene: to the extent that the Apostles' undertaking is directed towards Heaven, it shall endure.

Notes

¹ F.C. Baur, 'Über Zweck und Veranlassung des Römerbriefs und die damit zusammenhängenden Verhältnisse der römischen Gemeinde. Eine historisch-kritische Untersuchung', *Tübinger Zeitschrift für Theologie*, 1836 fasc. 3, 59-178, reprint in idem, *Ausgewählte Werke in Einzelausgaben 1*, ed. K. Scholder, Stuttgart – Bad Cannstatt, Frommann 1963, 147-266 (original pagination: 59-178). – Parts of the present paper are forthcoming in more

elaborate form and in dialogue with systematic theology: 'Romans 9–11 and Political Events in Rome and Judaea, with Some Thoughts on Historical Criticism and Theological Exegesis', *Zeitschrift für dialektische Theologie*.

² On Melancthon and the purpose of Romans see the excellent discussion in J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans; A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (Anchor Bible 33) New York, Doubleday 1993, 74–80.

³ Baur, 'Zweck', 160. Apart from Stendahl and Käsemann, see J. Munck, *Christus und Israel*, (Acta Jutlandica 28.3) Copenhagen, Munksgaard 1956, 30; N.A. Dahl, 'The Future of Israel', in idem, *Studies in Paul; Theology for the Early Christian Mission*, Minneapolis, Augsburg 1977, 137-158; F.-W. Marquardt, *Die Juden im Römerbrief*, (Theol. St. 107) Zürich, Theol. Verlag 1971, 3; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 541 (but cf. his doubts *ibid.* 76); S.K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press 1994, 285-293. Different: M.-J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul, Épître aux Romains*, Paris, Gabalda 1950, 224; S. Légasse, *L'épître de Paul aux Romains*, (Lectio divina commentaires 10) Paris, Cerf 2002, 574.

⁴ Baur, 'Zweck', 174, 180. This feature of Baur's work was exposed by J. Munck, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte*, (Acta Jutlandica 26.1) Copenhagen, Munksgaard 1954, chapters 3, 4, and 5.

⁵ K. Stendahl, 'Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West', *HTR* 56 (1963) 199-215, repr. in idem, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, London, SPCK / Philadelphia, Fortress 1969, 78-96, quote 85, cf. *ibid.* 2-4.

⁶ E. Käsemann, 'Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans', in idem, *Perspectives on Paul*, London, SCM 1969 and repr., 60-78 (ET from 'Rechtfertigung und Heilsgeschichte im Römerbrief', in idem, *Paulinische Perspektiven*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck 1969, 178-210).

⁷ E. Käsemann, *An die Römer*, (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament 8a) 3rd ed. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck 1974, 243-247. On Käsemann see also W.S. Campbell, 'Ernst Kaesemann on Romans: The Way Forward or the End of an Era', in Daniel Patte and Christina Grenholm (eds.), *Modern Interpretations of Romans: Tracking Their Hermeneutical / Theological Trajectory*, London, Clark 2013, 161-189.

⁸ Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, 129-132.

⁹ Important sources are Acts 18:2 and Suetonius, Claudius 25.4, see M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, vol. 2, Jerusalem, Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities 1980, 113-117.

¹⁰ Lagrange, *Romains*, 324f. (patristic evidence); Légasse, *Romains*, 858f.; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 687f. Käsemann, *Römer*, 354-356 disagrees and prefers an explanation from asceticism.

¹¹ See esp. A.J.M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans*, Edinburgh, Clark 1988, 44-65; and discussion in K.P. Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate; Revised and Expanded Edition*, Edinburgh, Clark 1991.

¹² On this issue and the relevant sources see my 'Sources on the Politics of Judaea in the Fifties CE – A Response to Martin Goodman', forthcoming in *Journal of Jewish Studies*.

¹³ Gal 2:16; 3:6-11, 24; Phil 3:9; cf 1 Thess 2:10.

¹⁴ 1QpHab 7:17-8:3; b.Makkot 24a; cf the use of verse in the 'eulogy of faith', Mekhilta de-R. Yishmael, beshallah 6 (ed. Horowitz p. 114f.) and Mekhilta de-R. Shimon ben Yohai 24:31 (ed. Epstein-Melamed p. 70).

¹⁵ Cf. Dahl, 'Future', 139

¹⁶ Cf. R. Bultmann, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 5th ed. Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck 1965, part 2.1., 'Die Theologie des Paulus'. Similarly J.D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, Grand Rapids – Cambridge, Eerdmans 1998, chapter 3, 'Humankind under Indictment', 4, 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ'.

¹⁷ Also seen, e.g., in 1 Cor 8-10 and 12-14. Fitzmyer notes the pattern without naming it: *Romans*, 576, 603. Baur, 'Zweck', 176f. calls this the Apostle's 'eigenthümliche Entwicklungs-Methode', i.e., approaching a subject from a general viewpoint before addressing the concrete issue.

¹⁸ Reading 9:30-33 as a prelude to 10:1ff.: Käsemann, *Römer*, 247; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 576f.; Sanders, *Paul, the Law*, 37. Dahl, 'Future', 147 reads 9:30-33 as a transition to the new start made in 10:1-3.

¹⁹ BDGA μέρος 1.c renders Rom 11:25, πῶρως ἀπὸ μέρους, as 'a partial hardening'.

²⁰ See Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul was not a Christian: The Original Message of Misunderstood Apostle*, New York, HarperCollins 2009, 252f. The insight dawned on Käsemann, *Römer*, 244.

²¹ Fitzmyer 542, citing J.W. Aageson, 'Scripture and Structure in the Development of the Argument in Romans 9-11', *CBQ* 48 (1986) 265-289, see esp. *ibid.* 282f.: Paul's argument is structured by way of his scriptural quotations and allusions, thus creating a link between Rom 9:24-26, Moses on Sinai (Exod 32-33) and 11:1-6, Elijah story (1 Kgs 19). The link between Rom 9:1-5 (Exod 32-33, Sinai) and 11:1-6 (1 Kgs 19, Horeb) is stressed in P.J. Tomson, 'If This be from Heaven...'; *Jesus and the New Testament Authors in their Relationship to Judaism*, (The Biblical Seminar 76) Sheffield Academic Press 2001, 208-213, 'The Irrevocable Calling of Israel'.

²² Lagrange, *Romains*, 225; Munck, *Christus und Israel*, 18, 27f.; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 544. Käsemann, *Römer*, 248 disagrees, and Légasse, *Romains*, 576 thinks it 'mal inspiré' to compare Paul's attitude with the 'argument

tactique' of Moses (!). But the Sinai story from Exodus is pervasive, Exod 33:19 being formally cited in Rom 9:15 and Exod 32:21 in Rom 10:19.

²³ Cf. Munck, *Christus und Israel*, 18 for similar thoughts. See the midrash on the three prophetic types, Elijah who stood with God against his people, Jonah who stood with his people against God, and Jeremiah who stood both with God and with his people, Avot de-Rabbi Natan B46, ed. Schechter p. 127.

²⁴ Avot de-Rabbi Natan, A40/B46, ed. Schechter p. 127f.; cf. Mishna Avot 5:17.