

## **A Rejoinder to Robert A. J. Gagnon's "Why the 'Weak' at Rome Cannot Be Non-Christian Jews"<sup>1</sup>**

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July 14, 2000 (updated 6/20/03 for web page)

I welcome Robert Gagnon's challenge to my argument that "the ἀσθένεια [weak] in faith" of Romans were Jewish people who did not believe in Jesus Christ, that this was, from Paul's perspective, a respectful euphemism for those whom Paul considered "stumbling," and in this sense not yet "the strong/able [οἱ δυνατοί]." Paul believed that in time this temporary state, which he referred to as a result of God's act of hardening, would change, and that his ministry, as well as the lives of the gentiles to whom he targeted this letter, were somehow, in God's inscrutable plan, integral to the process by which these Jewish people would come to share with the addressees' faith in/of Christ. Whether the historical realities eventually conformed to Paul's expressed expectations is another matter.

I would not like to claim that the situation or identities must be as I have argued in *The Mystery of Romans*, but at the same time I want to respond to Gagnon's remarkable assertion that it "cannot" be possible. In historical terms, when approaching the interpretation of an historical document, we test hypotheses and argue probabilities. In the case of this letter, as Gagnon perceptively notes, much is at stake for the interpretation of Paul and early "Christian" theology, not least, the way in

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gagnon's article (*CBQ* 62 [2000] 64-82) is a response to my chapter entitled, "Who were the 'Weak' and the 'Strong' in Rome?," in *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996) 85-165.

which Jewish identity and behavior are regarded by those who look to Romans to shape their world-view. He rightfully notes that the reading I have offered proposes a more respectful view on the part of Paul, with helpful implications for contemporary Jewish-Christian relations. However, putting aside Gagnon's and my apparently different ideological concerns, the first order of business for New Testament historical criticism is the pursuit of the probable meaning for the original author and audience. Keeping this concern central, I shall take up each of the points which Gagnon treats, allowing, for the sake of simplicity, the structure of his response to dictate the arrangement of this rejoinder, albeit not necessarily sharing his evaluation of the relative weight of the issues. In doing so I will seek to clarify issues which he has identified, at points offering additional observations that enhance the probability of the interpretation I have offered, but I will not seek to argue again all the angles originally considered, whether addressed by Gagnon, or not.

### ***I. Soft Evidence<sup>2</sup>***

#### A. The Compatibility of Romans 14:1—15:13 With Jewish-Christian Relations in Rome

Gagnon states that “it is inconceivable that the Gentile Christians had any kind of control in the synagogues, so one must assume that the ‘welcoming’ consisted of welcoming the ‘weak’ into their own meetings in house-churches. What non-Christian Jews would want to visit with

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<sup>2</sup> This is Gagnon's category for arguments that he believes would “if true, apply equally to non-Christian Jews and to Christian and, therefore, do not in and of themselves *prove* that the “weak” are non-Christian Jews” (65; emphasis his). But as will be shown, the results of my points, if sustained, are more substantial than Gagnon here suggests for determining the probable identity of the situation and players.

Christian Gentiles instead of being visited by them?” (65-66). Gagnon suggests that the more likely situation involves Christian gentiles “free from law to welcome ‘Noahide’ Gentile Christians” (66).

In the first statement Gagnon finds “inconceivable” my proposal that the action is taking place in Jewish communal contexts (synagogues), but why is this so? My view is not predicated upon the same assumptions as his objection. I argue rather that it is the “weak/stumbling-in-terms-of-faith-in-Christ” who are in a position to “judge” the “strong/able-to-believe-in-terms-of-faith-in-Christ,” and not the other way around, as Gagnon suggests. He has turned by argument upside down, then attacked that misrepresentation. It is not my view that gentiles in the synagogues of Rome had the kind of control that Gagnon posits, and I specifically challenge those constructions which suppose, on the basis of an arguable interpretation of the evidence regarding the meaning and impact of the edict of Claudius, that this makes sense of Paul’s rhetoric.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it seems to me that the so-called weak/stumbling-in-faith are those who can “approve” whether the way in which the strong/able-to-believe serve Christ is acceptable to God or not (14:18). This language indicates the ability to “guarantee” the action as “genuine,” as the real thing (δόκιμος). So, in terms of institutional power relations, ironically, it is implied that those labeled strong/able-to-believe-ones are in subordinate positions to those called weak/stumbling-in-the-ability-to-believe. The questions turns on what it is that some are “able/have the strength” to believe in, while some are stumbling over or not-yet-able-to-believe in this. Is it the role of their relative faith in freedom from Law-observance after believing in Jesus Christ, or simply their relative faith in Jesus as Christ? The prevailing view, and that of Gagnon, is the former; I

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<sup>3</sup> See *Mystery of Romans*, 372-87.

have argued that the issue is the latter. It should be noted that resolution of this matter in the direction I have argued would not conform to Gagnon's definition of soft evidence, since the label "weak/stumbling" would not then "apply equally" to Christ-believers.

"Welcoming" or "accepting" need not signal a hard line of inside/outside, an "inter" group development, that is, *between* rivals, but may indicate an in-group/ out-group situation, an "intra" group tension taking place *within* a larger body of people. "Visiting" by the "weak" in the sense Gagnon invokes is not stated, and far from certain. The exhortation to regard another with welcome or acceptance instead of contention is not uncommon within a household or family when the speaker may consider that at least one of the parties believes that there are grounds for disputing the beliefs or actions of another. This aspect is perhaps clearer in the translation "accept," or "receive," since προσλαμβάνω is used here in the middle form to communicate a sense of "*choosing to take/receive*" someone alongside oneself, including the kind of welcome that Paul would expect to be extended to himself by Philemon, a dear friend and coworker with Paul (Philemon 17), where Paul is not a stranger or visitor, *contra* Gagnon's imposed limitation for the term's usage.

The idea of welcoming or accepting is a simple social dynamic, it presumes not control but interaction, in this case, in the matter of "judgments/disputes over opinions/thoughts/scruples," or, as Gagnon suggests, "judgmental evaluation of positions" (14:1). Paul calls for behavior modification on the part of the "strong/able," who are, paradoxically, in a weaker social position: they are to refrain from the usual resentful behavior toward those in stronger or dominant positions

of power;<sup>4</sup> instead, they are to welcome them. Yet the relative strength of the “strong/able” is not set out in terms of institutional power, and it is not about the different *opinions* that are held, for these are not to be judged/disputed, but the difference exists rather in terms of relative *faith*. The issue also turns around the fact that the strong/able have the implied ability *to believe* that they may “eat” in such a cavalier or resentful and judgmental way that it may “put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother,” indeed, so as to “destroy the one for whom Christ died” (14:13, 15). The weak/stumbling, on the other hand, have the implied ability *to judge* such eating as inappropriate in the service of God, and thus not to give it the seal of approval as genuine (14:18).

The majority of interpreters recognize that the instruction to “welcome” is directed to the strong/able, and Paul’s argument largely targets them rather than the weak/stumbling (cf. 14:1-2; 14-15:4). Yet the presence of the language of mutuality in the midst of the discourse (cf. 14:3-13; 15:5-7) has led many to conclude that the weak also constitute Paul’s target audience, albeit a minority group. However, a call such as Paul’s for mutual respect may be made to a target group without implying that the “other” is also a part of the writer’s/speaker’s audience, that is, that the writer/speaker has the same authority or access to them as those to whom he writes/speaks.

It is in this way that I believe Paul’s even-handed appeals to mutuality reveal rhetorical aspects of both the situation and Paul’s

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<sup>4</sup> A study of the cultural context of this language of weakness and strength in Greco-Roman terms of relative power is now available in M. Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1—15.13 in Context* (SNTSMS 103; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); my review of his work is available in *JBL* 120.1 (2001) 178-80 and *RBL* (<http://www.bookreviews.org/bookdetail.asp?TitleId=2111&CodePage=821,961,2140,1344,2111>).

anticipation of the desired results. Thus the nature of the situation of the target audience of Christ-believing gentiles he addresses is inextricably linked with the response of the weak/stumbling to their beliefs and behavior: will they approve or reject them. This implies that the weak/stumbling are the dominant group by whom the faith claims of the strong/able are constrained. At the same time, Paul's appeals to mutuality reveal his expectation that the strong/able-to-believe-in-Jesus-Christ, whom he addresses, are to adopt a welcoming posture of respect toward the weak/stumbling-in-faith-in/of-Christ over disputes about food, wine, and days that have apparently arisen. This will lead to the mutual welcoming of themselves by the weak/stumbling-in-faith instead of continued disapproval, and thus to the glorious fulfillment of the prophetic wish for the unity of all humankind in the worship of the One God of all (15:5-13). In other words, while not directed to the weak/stumbling, Paul's rhetoric appeals to the strong/able on their behalf, and anticipates their inclusion in the restoration which his own ministry is concerned to bring about (cf. 11:11-27).

With regard to the identity of the weak/stumbling, interpreters who consider them to be Christ-believers overwhelmingly recognize, *contra* Gagnon, that the rhetoric implies that they are *Jewish*.<sup>5</sup> When Paul moves in the next section to describing his priestly ministry to gentiles, not seemingly inclusive of the weak/stumbling-in-faith within this scope, this suggests the social interaction I have proposed; moreover, it is Gagnon who breaks even further from the interpretive consensus when he argues that this language indicates the weak/stumbling-in-faith are not Jewish, and the situation "consists exclusively of Christian Gentiles" (67; see the commentaries on 15:15-16). Note also that Gagnon's proposed alternate

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<sup>5</sup> The various views are succinctly set out in Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak*, 1-23.

identification of them as Noahide gentiles is actually an identity still based on inter- and intra-Jewish terms of group classification, implying that Jewish matters of social concern are in view, not merely inter- or intra-gentile. In fact, not only the term Noahide bespeaks a Jewish classification of social space, so too does even the term “gentile.”

The question Gagnon poses presumes a level of group separation as well as institutional developments that are themselves being questioned by my reading of the text. Gagnon conceives of a situation in which “visiting” another’s house of worship takes place as it might across institutional boundaries of later times. However, it is not clear that any “Christianity” (much less separate “Christianities”) has developed such institutional form in Rome. Gagnon must answer, even according to the terms of his own proposal, several related questions that arise. Why are there these two types of Christ-believing gentiles in Rome, one defined in Jewish communal terms and the other not? Why do they normally meet separately? Why would they now be seeking to meet together, so that Paul’s rhetoric appears to be addressing a live concern in Rome? Are gentile members of supposedly non-Pauline-like “Christian” groups who still maintain the value of Jewish life, now seeking to attend meetings of supposedly Pauline-like groups (although founded apart from Paul),<sup>6</sup> even though they do not share Gagnon’s fundamental view of reality that Jewish life is now obsolete for all Christ-believers? Why? Are there already, apart from groups founded by Paul, two other institutional forms of Christ-faith, and if so, why is one presumed to be any more likely to be in a position to welcome the other to meetings?

Returning to my own construction of the situation, it is not difficult to imagine that non-Christ-believing Jews (or Gagnon’s Noahide gentiles)

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<sup>6</sup> Do we have any independent witness of this tradition?

would want to attend (or with Gagnon, visit), for any number of reasons, subgroups consisting in part, if not largely, of Christ-believing gentiles, as long as these subgroups were part of the Jewish synagogue communities of Rome, which would be the case prior to the institutionalization of sectarian Christianity. In other words, if the proposal, on the grounds that I have argued it is kept clearly in view, then Gagnon's informal fallacy is avoided, for the assumptions that follow from the position taken do not exclude conclusions based on different premises. I have argued that we have no evidence—including that available in this letter—that when Romans was written the Christ-believing groups represented a form of institutionalized Christianity already separated from Jewish communal life. It is common for interpreters to assume that such a period of time existed prior to Romans;<sup>7</sup> the difference is I suggest that this is what the rhetoric of Romans implies the case to still be.<sup>8</sup>

Further, Gagnon states: "That Paul's few remarks to the "weak" (14:3b, 10a, 13a; 15:7) can be explained by his ability to address the synagogue is dubious, since the letter itself is clearly addressed only to Christians, not to any in the synagogues (1:7)." It is anything but "clear" to me. The passages cited by Gagnon are not unambiguous with respect to the matter at hand. As noted above, this informal fallacy misses the point that it is precisely the issue of who was addressed, and whether or to what degree they are a part of Jewish communal life that is under debate. His statement of the case ignores the fact that I have argued that the target audience of the discourse is the strong/able (Christ-believing gentiles) throughout the letter, but that these gentiles live in the midst of the dominant Jewish communal environment controlled by

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<sup>7</sup> E.g., P. Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994) 7.

the weak/stumbling (non-Christ-believing Jews), even if that community or those communities are themselves minority group/s within the larger Roman context. As I read it, Paul's rhetoric expresses the view of one who represents the interests of the weak/stumbling as an insider—a reformer, not a sectarian—although he counts himself among the strong/able addressees, because he is a member of their minority coalition of Christ-believers (15:1-3). The resultant subgroup seam is evidence of an us/them inner-synagogal boundary. Paul's rhetorically inclusive statements in the passages Gagnon lists embody in essence the very nature of what Paul states: Paul argues from 12:1 onward that the strong/able are to learn to think with renewed minds, to see the situation of the weak/stumbling not merely from their own limited perspective, but also from that of God. That is achieved, in part, by considering the situation from the perspective of the weak/stumbling other, whose interests even Paul's ministry to these gentile addressees represents (cf. 11:13-16). Paul describes the situation in terms of realized eschatology; as described in 15:7-12, he anticipates that time when all Israel, in concert with the rest of humankind will be restored. He argues that will be a result of the behavior of the gentile addressees observing what Paul herein instructs, however paradoxical that may seem. The interests of both parties are inextricably intertwined in Paul's mind, and he writes this bold reminder in order to ensure that the strong/able addressees do not fail to grasp this fact, which purpose creates the kind of inclusive rhetoric under discussion.

I am arguing that there is not yet in Rome the establishment of institutional Christianity, in fact, that those to whom Paul writes are not yet even sectarians breaking away from the fabric of Jewish communal

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<sup>8</sup> I have since further articulated this position in "The Jewish Context of the Gentile

life. They have not imagined any such move. Nevertheless, their growing resentment toward those who do not accept their novel faith-claims as gentiles in-Christ apart from becoming proselytes, indicates that the seeds of such developments have been planted, and, most important for this point, that it is the recognition of this threat that Paul, by way of this letter, seeks to arrest. Thus Romans is the response of a reformer involved in the work of a coalition on behalf of the interests of the larger group, not a sectarian involved in the formation of a protest group.<sup>9</sup> In other words, in this letter we find Paul challenging the emergence of judgmental attitudes among Christ-believing gentiles which might lead to developments that he considers unacceptable and dangerous for Jewish people, although it is likely that those to whom he writes have not considered the issue from the point of view expressed in Romans.

In my view, Paul does not address “Christians,” but Christ-believers who are otherwise identifiable in institutional Jewish terms, terms, in fact, which Gagnon must draw upon himself in order to make sense of the identity to which he appeals when describing the weak in a new way as “Noahides.” I regret my use of even the adjectival “*Christian Jew* or gentile,” as the pre-Christianity level of social developments would have been better illuminated by following Paul’s lead, since he did not identify anyone or any group as “Christian,” but from a Jewish framework of reference as either Jewish or not (gentile). In subsequent work I refer

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Audience Addressed in Paul’s Letter to the Romans” *CBQ* 61 (1999) 283-304.

<sup>9</sup> Sectarianism as defined e.g., by Bryan Wilson, “The Sociology of Sects,” in his *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982) 89-120. I use coalition here in the sense defined by J. Boissevain, *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), esp. 170-205. A coalition as “a temporary alliance of distinct parties for a limited purpose,” although they accumulate more tasks as time passes when not yet achieving that purpose (171).

instead to Christ-believing Jews or gentiles,<sup>10</sup> which helps keep in focus the dynamic interplay of identity within this coalition. What is required of Gagnon is evidence to the contrary, at least an argument which interprets Paul's rhetoric in terms of a social model revealing the institutionalization of sectarian dynamics in a way appropriate to this period.

#### B. The Credibility of Paul's Exhortations to Non-Christian Jews in Romans 14:1—15:13

Gagnon contends that the rhetorical distinction between the strong, to whom Paul writes, and the weak, about whom he writes, cannot be maintained, since Paul calls for mutual acceptance. As with the last point, this criticism fails to recognize the natural distinction in discourse between the target (or implied, encoded, rhetorical, authorial) audience and the larger group that might be present. Although Gagnon himself includes the modifying "*implied* audience" in the conclusion of this point (67), he does not appear to recognize what this implies about the perhaps very different make-up of the larger "actual" audience or situation within which the target audience is addressed. He also fails to recognize that Paul has revealed that his own perspective, indeed ministry as apostle to the gentiles, is inextricably tied up with his role as a representative (part of the remnant) on behalf of the interests of stumbling (that is, non-Christ-believing) Jews (cf. 11:13-16, 26, 28-36).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I am grateful for the suggestion and example provided by Philip F. Esler, *Galatians* (NTR; London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> See further my "Challenging the Limits That Continue to Define Paul's Perspective on Jews and Judaism," *Reading Israel in Romans: Legitimacy and Plausibility of Divergent Interpretations* (Vol. 1: "Romans Through History and Cultures: Receptions and Critical Interpretations"; eds. Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte; Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2000) 217-29.

Paul writes specifically of his responsibility for gentiles, but he frames his concerns, and what should now be theirs, as well as his argument throughout, in terms of Jewish conceptual and social space, not the pagan world of these gentiles' past and present lives. This characteristic of the letter is especially strange if these gentiles are members of sectarian and thus post-Jewish communities. If the target gentiles do not live out their identities in Jewish social space, why then is the clarification of their past, present and future identity, as well as the call to behavioral conformity predicated upon and entirely concerned with all of this Jewish theological and social instead of relevant pagan stuff, especially since they are in Rome, being Romans, or at least among Romans who would otherwise be expected to form a—if not *the*—primary reference group?

Gagnon argues that “there is no reason to construe the biblical quotations in Rom 15:9-12 in such a way that ‘one another’ in 15:7 means Jew and gentile,” and he proposes instead an intra-gentile conflict (66-67). Yet Gagnon’s following digression suggests that he does recognize that Paul’s language indicates otherwise,<sup>12</sup> in keeping with the consensus. Indeed, the context of this entire exhortation turns around the “reality” to which Paul appeals in the verse that Gagnon seems to drop: “For I tell you that Christ became a servant of the *circumcision* to demonstrate God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises of the fathers, now that the *gentiles* glorify God for mercy. Just as it has been written....” (vv. 8-9b; emphasis added). In this context the several scriptures Paul cites signal the inclusion of gentiles in the worship of God within the midst of Israel, and Paul suggests that this desired

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<sup>12</sup> Gagnon paradoxically observes: “Instead, the quotations document the assertion that God in Christ welcomed the Gentiles into the fold of Jewish believers (the remnant, not non-Christian Jews, contra Nanos)” (67).

demonstration among the addressees would be evidence of the arrival of the awaited age to come, when such behavior is expected to commence.

### C. The Possibility That “Your Brother” Is a Reference to Non-Christian Jews <sup>13</sup>

I am perplexed by Gagnon’s insistence that Paul does not and would not call or consider non-Christ-believing Jewish people brothers and sisters of Christ-believing gentiles, and the differentiation stressed on the basis of “ethnic” versus “spiritual” foundation (67-68).<sup>14</sup> Perhaps he means racial rather than ethnic, since any kind of perceived or real affiliation—including spiritual—that binds a group together as a social entity is an expression of ethnicity, including spiritual conviction or behavior.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, any kind of perception of differentiation between groups ineluctably gives rise to discrimination, which is characteristic of us-and-them language as well as actions, a social dynamic which social identity theorists have amply demonstrated to be at work in modern individualistic cultures,<sup>16</sup> which would be expected to apply to an even greater degree to the more dyadic personalities of Paul’s time.

I do not deny that there is a level of differentiation between those *to* whom Paul writes and those *about* whom he writes, and that this distinction has to do with the relative affiliation of either group with respect to faith in Christ. In fact, I argue that this distinction is integral to

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<sup>13</sup> As with point A above, I do not see how this issue conforms to Gagnon’s definition of soft-evidence.

<sup>14</sup> My response here applies also to the similar objections toward my view expressed by M. Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak*, 135-36.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Fredrik Barth, “Introduction.” *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Ed. Fredrik Barth; Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969) 9-38; Marcus Banks, *Ethnicity: anthropological constructions* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>16</sup> See Michael A. Hogg and Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations and Group Processes* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

Paul's authority to address those to whom he writes in Rome in the manner that he does: as an apostle of Christ (1:1-15; 15:1-33). But this does not mean that there are no circumstances under which he might also address non-Christ-believing Jewish people as his brothers and sisters. Or in which he might address non-Christ-believing gentiles as his brothers and sisters apart from such qualification, or likewise as the brothers and sisters of Christ-believing gentiles, since they are such, for example, in terms of Paul's belief in the One Creator God of all humankind (3:29-30).

Fictive kinship does not consist of one tightly defined social group affiliation to the exclusion of all others, but is dynamic. The nature of affiliation is multi-dimensional; depending upon the context of any person or persons, the salience of fictive kinship is ever changing (on whatever terms perceived by the party's in question, spiritual or material), as is a person's own identity. To give but one simple example, the salience of fictive kinship, like ethnicity, changes with proximity. For many North Americans, apart from biological, linguistic, or other constructions of group affiliation, the shift will be evident in terms of spatial location. When in his or her town, neighborhood affiliation might be of consequence for an intra-town ballgame. But town instead of neighborhood affiliation would be more salient for an inter-town game, whether each town's teams consist of one of the neighborhood teams of that town, or are made-up of all-stars from the various neighborhoods of the respective towns. When flying from a town other than his or her own to another town within another state, then state, much less town or neighborhood affiliation, may be sufficient to constitute fictive kinship. And if flying between two European cities, mere U.S., much less shared

first language affiliation, may be the salient standard of “brother-and-sisterhood.”

Fictive kinship can take many creative forms. Evidence of a poignant counterpoint to Gagnon’s wooden kinship assumptions is found in the rabbinic commentary on the book of Genesis, *Genesis Rabbah*, as articulated by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton. In the fourth century, when the Roman Empire was changing to Christian rule, and repressive measures toward paganism became inclusive of Judaism in reaction to the recently defeated pagan agenda of Julian, the rabbis identified Rome with Esau, the sibling rival of Jacob (i.e., Israel/Judaism). They thereby ingeniously found the current crisis adumbrated in the lives of the patriarchs. Thus in the Scriptures the enemy of the people of Jacob is ironically their brother as well. And how was this claim to common kinship conceived? “That concession—Rome is a sibling, a close relative of Israel—represents an implicit recognition of Christianity’s claim to share the patrimony of Judaism, to be descended from Abraham and Isaac.”<sup>17</sup>

Paul does qualify his kinship reference to Jewish people who do not share his faith in Christ in Romans 9:3 as, “brethren according to the flesh.” But the purpose of the reference is to communicate that the current standing of those Israelites is *not* as the gentiles to whom he writes might be beginning to resentfully suppose, that is, that they are no longer God’s people, no longer brothers and sisters in the family created by the One God, no longer those for whom “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (11:29). Quite the contrary, Paul insists that they are indeed the very ones for whom both the Christ-believing Jewish remnant (among whom Paul counts himself; cf. 11:1-36) and the gentile addressees are instead, in obedient faith, to live in gratitude

(12:1—16:27). Therefore, Paul’s qualifying comment here is simply a part of the context of this appeal, not a universal statement that limits him to only this point of reference in all rhetorical or social contexts. It is useful in this case for clarity when qualifying the standing of non-Christ-believing Jewish people, those empirical Israelites to whom he refers when writing to Christ-believing gentiles.

Has Gagnon missed the very purpose of Paul’s conclusion by hanging so much on a qualification buried within one rhetorical point made in setting up the case? Do we have a letter from Paul by which to disqualify, much less quantify Gagnon’s universal proposition that Paul *could not* consider non-Christ-believing Jewish people the kin of Christ-believing gentiles? Does not the implied concern of the correspondence under consideration tell against any such proposal? There are several kinds of branches, but the tree has only one root by which they are made holy (11:16). When the reader turns to the matters Paul takes-up in 14:1—15:13 in particular, the referent for his kinship language turns upon the identity of the weak/stumbling and strong/able with which the interpreter approaches the topic. Does not Paul logically include non-Christ-believers when writing in 14:15 of “that one for whom Christ died,”<sup>18</sup> whether the person in view believed that this was so or not? Moreover, it seems that here the non-Christ-believer is specifically in view, since the disputable eating action of the strong/able “brother/sister” could “harm” the weak/stumbling to the point of “destroying” him/her, leading this brother/sister to respond to the strong/able one’s claim to good with “blasphemy.”

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<sup>17</sup> *Jewish and Christian Doctrines: The Classics Compared* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 59-79 (citation from 62).

<sup>18</sup> An inference note also by C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979) 2.715-17, whom he refers to as “those outside the church” or “outsiders” (2.717).

Furthermore, along this line I challenge Gagnon's claim to speak for Paul when he argues that "there is a theological reason for Paul's not calling unbelieving Jews brothers: in his mind, Israel (the Israel which is not a remnant) *at present* lies outside the sphere of salvation and inside the sphere of destruction" (pp. 67-68; emphasis his). Gagnon's list of citations includes 9:1-3, 22; 10:1; 11:17-24, but they must be torn out of their context to make such a point. Paul's argument of chapters 9—11 culminates in 11:25-31, wherein Paul contends that in spite of how things might appear to those to whom he writes presently, that the stumbling of Israel are foremost in God's "present," albeit inscrutable mind, who is forever faithful to his covenant. As the argument develops, before those verses of chapter 11 cited by Gagnon, foremost in Paul's own ministry to the gentiles is the successful alleviation of the suffering of that part of Israel which is presently stumbling (vv. 13-16). Thus his ministry to the nations is in order to provoke to jealousy those Israelites he believes to be stumbling, by which he fulfills his role as one of the remnant, an image that only makes sense within the sphere of concern with the whole piece of cloth, torn, but not "presently" destroyed; rather, Paul responds to such an incredulous suggestion defiantly: "*May it never be!*"

For Paul, some are stumbling, but in God's *present* plan they must not be considered to have fallen; rather, they are temporarily suffering in the service of the very gentiles in Rome to whom Paul writes. Moreover, if he believed that his present ministry among the gentiles would be positively valued, as such jealousy (i.e., emulation) implies, then this means that he believes that his actions will still be understood as operating within Jewish communal values, and known among these Jewish people as expressions of their own Jewish expectations for a ministry among gentiles when the awaited time has arrived. But how could this be

conceivable if the addressees' groups were already perceived, in Jewish terms, as expressions of non-Jewish and thus pagan religious life, for that would be the case for a new religious movement constructed apart from any Jewish communal life (or any Jewish people, per Gagnon). Moreover, how would they even be aware of the internal developments of such independent communities?<sup>19</sup>

#### D. The Monotheistic Character of the Appeal to the "Weak"

It is difficult to understand the logic of arguing that Lord, when not specified as Jesus Christ, can be determined not to refer to God. Gagnon's own concessions in the midst of his argument are sufficient evidence, as far as I am concerned, to save the space for other topics. My argument does not hang on this, and would not be impaired, as far as I see, if the case could be proven to be as Gagnon suggests, since Paul and his target audience believe in Jesus Christ as Lord, regardless of whether those about whom he writes do or so not, and thus they can attribute towards Christ the "others" God-ward intentions.

The several minor arguments at the end of this section are not decisive, reflecting rather the variety of readings possible dependent upon the interpreters' working assumptions about both the situation addressed and the intentions of Paul in writing. With regard especially to Gagnon's appeal to 1 Corinthians, or Paul's other letters, an interpreter should be careful to qualify the way in which the available evidence from other letters is itself qualified. The meaning of the usage of language there is no more self-evident than it is in Romans: it must be considered within the limitations of the context of its interpreted usage in the

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<sup>19</sup> For more detailed discussion of the implications of Paul's appeal to the jealousy motif in chapter 11, see my *Mystery of Romans*, 247-55; and "The Jewish Context of the

several extant documents; moreover, it should not be used as though it gives expression to every sentiment that Paul might hold at all times, for all people, in all places, so as to limit what “can” be argued as probable for the interpretation of the text of Romans. Making the reading of Romans dependent upon the language usage of 1 Corinthians, which is of course subject to debatable interpretive moves, is misguided methodologically, and should not constitute the primary order of appeal. I prefer to seek a comprehensive reading that accounts for the rhetorical tension within Romans on its own terms, then apply the same discipline to 1 Corinthians or any other letter under consideration, and only then seek to compare and contrast the results.

The evidence for what Paul “can” or “cannot” think is extremely limited. If Paul does not share Gagnon’s ideological perspective that non-Christ-believing Jews are not fictive kin within the people of God apart from faith in Christ, although confessing faith in the One God, then this objection to my reading is obviated.

#### E. Romans 14:22b-23 as Condemnation of the “Strong” for Eating in Doubt

I do not find any substance in the argument against my reading of 14:22b-23 as pertaining to the self-regulation of the strong/able, censuring boastful disregard for the faith concerns of the weak/stumbling because unable to yet believe. In fact, returning to the text in view of Gagnon’s argument has led to the recognition of features that strengthen my proposal, as discussed below. I agree that it is a judgment of conscience (preferably consciousness) that Paul is calling for, find Gagnon’s appeal to 1 Cor. 10:25-30 gratuitous, since it is precisely the

case in Rome that the strong/able know that what they propose to eat publicly is questionable according to the faith standards of the weak/stumbling, have challenged the presupposition that the way to read this language is with regard to the level of faith toward what is eaten rather than in the matter of whether Jesus is the Christ, and have argued my position on the basis of the context before and after this passage, not only 11:20 or 14:2, to which he appeals, but the verses immediately preceding as well as following.

While in *Mystery of Romans*, like Gagnon, I followed the prevailing translation of ὁ διακρινόμενος in 14:23 as “to be at odds with oneself/doubt/ waver,” this is actually a questionable way to translate this participle. As already argued, *contra* Gagnon, if translated in this secondary way, it does not “most naturally” refer to the weak, but to the strong; in Paul’s argument the appeal is to a higher value for the strong than they would like to sustain as their right. Yet this reading renders the sentiment expressed in this verse arguably redundant, since this point is already expressed in v. 22. Which brings up to a new issue for discussion: the primary usage of διακρίνω in the middle voice is not about doubting but rather “choosing to take issue with/dispute/criticize.”<sup>20</sup>

Translating ὁ διακρινόμενος to refer to “the one choosing to dispute” the opinions of the other who is weak/stumbling in faith has the advantage of keeping in front of the reader the overarching concern of

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<sup>20</sup> See διακρίνω in BAG, p. 185, 2.a. This is one of those interesting cases where it is in fact added in the subsequent note 2.b that the meaning of doubt or wavering appears first in the NT, which raises a caution flag: Why does this unique meaning appear suddenly there? It is possible and arguably better to read the meaning of note a (to take issue, dispute) in 4:23, since disputing emphasizes the nature of the tension is with another rather than within oneself alone; although self-doubt can be created by such tension, this remains a result and thus secondary consideration for translation. Likewise, the other NT verses listed read well with the meaning of dispute. Note also Louw and Nida, *Lexicon*, 33.412, to express disapproval, to criticize; see also 33.444. I am grateful to Peter Spitaler for bringing this matter to my attention.

the larger passage begun with the instruction in v. 1 not to do so: the addressees are instead to welcome the “weak/stumbling in faith,” yet not “to disputes [διακρίσεις] over opinions [διαλογισμῶν],” that is, to welcome them without judging as wrong the behavior practices that the weak/stumbling in faith group have calculated to be appropriate for themselves in the service of God.<sup>21</sup> This translation also works nicely for the usage of διεκρίθη in 4:20; that is, that Abraham did not take issue with or dispute with God about God’s promise, but instead trusted God. I have argued that the relative faith of Abraham is paradigmatic for the construction of the present distinction Paul draws in Romans between the relative faith of the strong/able-to-believe and the weak/stumbling-in-faith. The latter are characterized in this way because they dispute the “strong/able-to-believe ones” claim that the promises of God to Abraham’s seed are fulfilled in Jesus Christ, as well as the resulting claim to inclusion of Christ-believing gentiles apart from proselyte conversion.

If translated consistent with Paul’s opening statement, it is the supposed strength/ability of the faith of the addressees that is undermined by Paul’s participial phrase in v. 23, “the ones choosing to take issue/dispute/criticize.” Paul subverts the value of the strong/able group’s theoretical rights regarding what they can eat when, as a result of disputing the value of the weak/stumbling group’s calculation of what is appropriate in the service of God, the strong/able choose to flaunt their rights with behavior known to offend and cause the stumbling of the other “for whom Christ died.” For Paul, this posture of disputing the sensibilities of the weak/stumbling-in-faith on these matters amounts to something worse than weakness/stumbling faith, for it is an act against

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<sup>21</sup> Διαλογισμός is related to the balancing or checking of accounts, and in general relates to one’s opinion/scruples, that is, what one calculates/reasons/thinks/judges appropriate for oneself (cf. BAGD; Spicq, *Lexicon*, ὀικονομέω, and n. 13).

faith, being unfaith, even sin, since it violates the essence of God-ward faith.

Reading 14:23 in this way seamlessly links Paul's concern to challenge the addressees to serve Christ—without assertion of their rights in matters of food or drink or “anything that causes your brother to stumble,” but rather to “pursue peace and the building up of one another (14:19-22)—with the immediately following instructions of 15:1-3. It is not self-pleasure according to one's perceived rights that are important in these matters, but rather, one's obligation, with Paul, “to bear-up the weakness/stumblingness of the not strong/able,” that is, following the example of Christ, to seek to “please” one's neighbor and “build them up.” An edge to Paul's use of strength/ability comes through, in concert with the challenge to an arrogant attitude among these Christ-believing gentiles toward the stumbling present state of some Israelites made in chapter 11, for it is in service of the other and not of oneself that strong/able faith of a “renewed mind” is manifest.

Gagnon's assessment of at least two of these points as “soft evidence,” meaning that “if true, apply equally to non-Christian Jews and to Christians and, therefore, do not in and of themselves *prove* that the ‘weak’ are non-Christian Jews” (65) has been shown to be mistaken. Moreover, no support was found for his conclusion that these points “are actually proof that the ‘weak’ are Gentile Christians” (81). Rather, each of my original points has been found, once informal fallacies, questionable assumptions, and compromising methods have been identified, to contribute to an internally consistent, logical, and probable interpretation of Paul's rhetoric. In addition, independent of challenge his assessment of my reading as making “the least sense” of the identity of the

weak/stumbling where this supposed “soft evidence” is concerned, his response to these points does not warrant the remarkable claim to have also overturned the overwhelming majority view that the weak are Jewish people, Christ-believers or not, but instead that the situation indicated is “*intra-Gentile*” (66); that is, his new proposition that the “most sense” is made “when they [the weak] are identified as [Noahide] *Gentile* Christians” (81; emphasis his).

## ***II. Hard Evidence***<sup>22</sup>

### A. Internal Consistency with Romans 1—11

Although admitting some agreement, Gagnon seeks to mount a case for limiting the value of the internal consistency of the overall letter that my reading provides between chapters 1—11 and 14—15, in fact, between 1—11 and 12—16. In introducing this point he makes two observations that warrant comment. First, he claims that, “one has to admit that chaps. 1—11 do not give us direct information about the ‘weak’” (73). I admit no such thing, and neither does Gagnon! He appeals to information in these chapters to establish who they are or are not, as have I, as have most interpreters of Romans (e.g., see his 2.D). Second, Gagnon grants that my reading makes chapters 2—4 and 9 “more directly pertinent to the situation in 14:1—15:13,” yet suggests that it remains to be explained “why most of 14:1-15:13 is directed against the Gentile Christian “strong” while most of chaps. 1—11 is directed against non-Christian Jews or has negative repercussions for them” (73). I do not agree with this later assertion, and I have addressed his proposed

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<sup>22</sup> Defined by Gagnon as “arguments which, if true, identify the ‘weak’ as non-Christian Jews rather than Christians” (65); I suggest that at least points A and C from his soft evidence belong here as well.

challenge at length in *Mystery of Romans*,<sup>23</sup> and here simply remind the reader that Paul seeks in this argument to first establish the security of identity of gentiles in Christ by God's grace before he turns to articulating the concomitant obligations. Paul explains how the gentile addressees as well as Israelites fit into God's plan to date, then censures any level of resentment toward those Israelites who do not appear to share these gentiles' present convictions. Paul criticizes the failure of these gentiles to extend to them the same lovingkindness that they are so grateful to have had extended toward themselves. And Paul explains how God wishes to use these gentiles in his plans for the salvation of "all Israel," but how the addressees current miscalculation of the meaning of the present situation, and thus of the behavior that is appropriate, could inhibit such glorious results. It seems to be Paul who "expect[s] a direct correspondence between the two sections" at 12:1, for it is he who provides the conjunctions that bind together his "bold reminder" of "the obedience of faith" as the following chapters unfold.

With respect to Gagnon's alternative reading, which posits uniquely that the "weak" are "Gentile Christians," his argument is with the prevailing interpretations, although it is composed as though it is with my reading. In *Mystery of Romans* I have also argued 1) against Romans as "just a self-recommendation"; 2) that Paul is creating what Gagnon terms a "'debt theology' eliciting from the Gentile Christians a righteous conduct based on appeals for gratitude"; 3) also that this is "made clear" in the transitions at 12:1 and 15:7; 4) that in chapter 2 Paul develops a "layered trap" (I refer to a rhetorical gambit) by way of the imaginary Jewish interlocutor that is sprung upon the unsuspecting gentile addressees when they respond inappropriately to God's grace toward

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<sup>23</sup> See also my discussion of the double character of the letter in "The Jewish Context of

themselves or the other. Gagnon's summarizing point 5 admits that my reading recognizes the oblique relationship that also exists between these sections of the letter. What he fails to provide is an argument that this means the weak/stumbling "cannot" be as I have proposed on these grounds, not an uncontested point that these observations do not "require the 'weak' to be non-Christian Jews." In addition, these points do not "prove" the identity that Gagnon proposes, but of course that does not mean that such an identity "cannot" be made on other grounds. But Gagnon does not provide them, so the reader is left only with his critique of the shortcomings of the traditional interpretations, not mine, yet not an alternative reading by Gagnon that can be itself subjected to analysis.

#### B. The Incompatibility of Paul's Approval of the "Weak" and Their Observance of the Law

In this argument Gagnon seeks to undermine the basis of my criticism of the prevailing view that the weakness of the weak/stumbling is a result of the continued value they place upon observance of Jewish practices—"Luther's trap"—which ranks the level of faith expressed in the actions of Christ-believers on the basis of a non-Jewish, Law-free evaluation of spirituality. Leaving aside that we are dealing with Paul's opinions, further removed by the later interpreters' understanding of them, and thus, *contra* Gagnon, subjective rather than "objective reality," it is Gagnon who concludes that, in matters of diet, the opinions of the weak are "false" (75; "false scruples," 76). Paul rather clearly tells the "strong/able" that they are not to proceed in their dealings with the weak/stumbling on any such dismissive basis, noting as well that what they believe and do is "for the Lord" (vv. 3-12). Is not judging the

scruples of the weak/stumbling false precisely what Paul told his addressees not to indulge?

I do not understand why Gagnon claims Paul in these verses merely accommodates instead of commends: Paul writes that what is being observed by the weak/stumbling is being done “in honor of the Lord” (vv. 6-7). And the line Gagnon seeks to draw between intention and action seems anachronistic. It is a distinction that Paul does not in this argument make; rather, Paul expresses the view that both the actions of the weak/stumbling-in-faith and the strong/able-to-believe make a difference when they are done “for the Lord,” and thus by definition, should not be undertaken in a way that will harm the other, or judge them. Once again, Gagnon’s appeal to Paul’s use of the language of weakness in 1 Corinthians is gratuitous; moreover, the argument as he poses it is misleading, since it suggests that I have argued in a way that I have not: as though Paul’s choice to become “weak to the weak” there in any way “meant that Paul became like someone who had faith in God but not in Christ” (76). In my view, the words may be the same, but the context of their usage is very different and should be treated accordingly. In Rome, the strong/able-to-believe are to adjust their behavior in matters of diet in the service of “those for whom Christ died,” whose opinions on such things, seemingly in keeping with prevailing Jewish norms, Paul commends, unlike Gagnon, to be appropriate for the weak/stumbling-in-faith.

Gagnon seems to think that by offering a new proposal that the “weak” are Christ-believing Noahide gentiles he has escaped the teeth of “Luther’s trap,” since the judgment has moved away from Jewish people. But has he done so? Apart from discussion of the problems of this identification in terms of the text, attributing to Paul the judgment of the

opinions of the weak on diet as “false” still runs against what Paul allows for those to whom he writes. Furthermore, it is still the belief in the value and practice of Jewish life, now shifted to gentiles, that Gagnon, in Paul’s voice, dismisses as meaningful service of the Lord. I do not see any change of substance, but rather a change in the direction of the judgement: it is towards a different “Jewish” group--Noahides. It still constitutes a dismissal of the value of Jewish identity and behavior, supposedly now on the part of gentiles who still claim to be identified in Jewish terms, as Noahide children of Abraham/righteousness.

Gagnon offers three reasons why it seems to him “inescapable that Paul did indeed treat observance of the Mosaic Law by other Jews as *at best* harmless and irrelevant, and for himself at best part of a pragmatic strategy for winning Jews to Christ” (76; emphasis his). Gagnon’s argument offers nothing new. His dispute is really not with my reading of Romans in particular. It is rather with any interpretation of Paul that has challenged ideological constructions of later Christian centuries on this topic by way of historical or other critical methods. It is not just “contemporary models of pluralism” to which he seems to object (65), but also the new appreciation of covenantal nomism by Christian scholars, or the so-called new-perspective on Paul.

The first reason Gagnon provides is a claim that the Law was regarded by Paul as universally problematic. In (a) he argues that it “excluded gentiles from salvation and thereby undermined the confession of God’s oneness” (76). But I read Paul very differently, and note below a few of Paul’s many positive affirmations of the Law and Jewish identity. For Paul, as for other Jewish people, the Law did not exclude *per se*, but defined how humankind could be *included* among the righteous ones of God in the age before the promise to Abraham on behalf of all the nations

as well as Israel had arrived; i.e., by becoming Israelites. Paul's difference of opinion with some other Jewish people was that he, along with the other Christ-believing Jewish apostles (cf. Gal. 2:1-10), declared that this age had dawned, and thus that gentiles too could now be included as righteous ones apart from becoming members of the nation Israel. Paul argued that it was the logical denial of this professed reality that compromised the oneness of God, should representatives of the nations that turned to God in Christ now be denied standing as children of Abraham apart from becoming children of the nation Israel. In contrast with Gagnon's claim, when Paul in Rom. 3:29-31 appeals to the inherent logic in the Jewish confession of the oneness of God in making a case for the equal inclusion of gentiles as gentiles, note that this very argument is based on the inherent value of the Law (the confession of the Shema is Law-positive; cf. Deut. 6!), and that Paul is quick to commend to these gentile addressees the continued positive role of the Law in the midst of this rhetorical effort: "Do we then nullify the Law by this faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we uphold the Law."

In (b) Gagnon argues that "the Law was essentially 'undoable' for both Jew and Gentile" (76). This was and is a view shared by most if not all Jewish people regarding the successful completion of all of the commandments at every moment in any person's or group's life. But the Law provided for forgiveness as well, anticipating that humans will sin. So why the Law? Paul explains several purposes, as do other Jewish interpreters, but these are not in order to render sinful Israelites or anyone else righteous by way of works, as Gagnon implies. Paul can exclaim that he was blameless according to the righteousness of the Law (Phil. 3:6), presumably not because he had never erred, but because the

Law anticipates and provides for such, which renders, *contra* Gagnon, the Law essentially doable for those of the Law, Israelites.

Gagnon's claim (c), that "salvation through observance of the Torah made self-boasting (4:2) and the establishment of one's 'own righteousness' (10:3) possible...." also rests on questionable interpretation, and taken along with the last point creates a damned-if-you-do/damned-if-you-don't outcome where any word from God is concerned. Would any Jews recognize their motivations to observe the Law in such charges? The Law does not save anyway, God does; the Law is a gift of God to the righteous as a result of God's grace: it is a privilege and responsibility to have and to obey (cf. Deut.; so too Paul: 3:1-2; 9:4-5; 11:28-29). And if Gagnon's view was right, so that the successful observance of the Law necessarily gave rise to "self-boasting," then how does the successful completion of any word from God not do the same, including the expression of faith, or observance of the many instructions for living that come from the hand of Paul, not least the call to live according to "the Law of Christ"? The rabbis, recognizing the evil impulse present in humans along with the good, warn of the secondary possibility of self-congratulation; but this human conundrum does not negate the fact that the observance of the Law is the proper grateful response of a people whom God called and entrusted with this great gift. That it can be used wrongly, as can the confession of faith in Christ, does not speak against the Law, or Christ, but against those who do so.

And (d) similarly, like the above comments, construes the nature of the Law for Paul in a narrow way that has been effectively challenged by many Christian as well as Jewish scholars: the Mosaic dispensation is not against the promise to Abraham, but follows from it as an additional expression of God's concern to communicate with sinful humankind in the

present age, until the promises have been fulfilled. While the thrust of Paul's argument has in the past been construed by other interpreters in the same way, to mean that "the Law had become obsolete" (77), Paul declares emphatically, quite differently, "May it never be!" (3:31). Indeed, the Law is for Paul "holy and just and good" (7:13), even "spiritual" (7:14), a special gift of God to Israel and not the gentiles (3:2; 9:4-5), and to faithful maintenance of such gifts God is forever committed (11:29).

Gagnon's second reason, the deduction that "the way in which Paul describes the Christian's relationship to the Law seems to preclude any possibility of Paul's thinking that the Law remained *binding* for himself and for other Jewish Christians" (77; emphasis his), is virtually indistinguishable from the first or third reasons, and consists of the asserted meaning which is apparently supposed to be self-evident from the stringing together of several verses. It is not evident to me, and the comments above offer sufficient response. Gagnon's traditional argument here actually misses the very point of my challenge, for we do not read in Romans Paul's view of the role of the Law for "every Christian." Paul does not address here any Jewish Christ-believing person's relationship with Law, including that of Paul himself, but rather his argument is specifically contextualized for non-Jewish and thus not-under-Law people to whom he writes.

The third reason, that the Law did not continue to be valid for other than evangelistic (read: manipulative) reasons for Paul or any other Christ-believing Jew, which is supposedly sustained by passages outside of Romans such as 1 Cor. 9, Gal. 2, or Phil. 3 (77, esp. n 12), takes us too far from the issues under discussion in this letter. In any event, Gagnon offers no new insights or arguments, but simply reiterates a

construal of this language that has a long tradition, and is well-known. Although alternative interpretations are available in *Mystery of Romans* and elsewhere, Gagnon does not discuss how alternative interpretations of this passage mitigate the traditional line of argument, which stands as a critique in itself that what is self-evident to one interpreter may be anything but that to another. Appeal to longstanding interpretations of which all are aware as though beyond dispute may serve to harden ideologically constructed boundaries for perceiving reality, but it does not advance the discussion of new insights, and stands in the way of the historical-critical task.

In my view, none of the passages to which Gagnon appeals disqualify the conclusion that Paul was a Jew who faithfully observed Torah. Paul's concern in the extant correspondence dealing with this topic is rather to explain why gentiles should not, must not, become Israelites, because it compromises the declaration that the age to come has dawned in Christ, that age when the nations join with Israel in worshipping the One God of Israel as the One God of all humankind. Many of Paul's arguments presuppose that the Law is still active for Paul and other Christ-believing Jewish people who claim that the age to come has dawned, which explains why it proved very desirable for the gentiles joining this Jewish coalition to seek identity as Israelites. It is because of this logical attraction that it became necessary to articulate how its role has been modified in the yet continuing present age where the inclusion of non-Jewish people is concerned; otherwise, Paul argued, the claim that the end of the ages had dawned in Christ would be rendered meaningless. For example, it is difficult to account for the rhetorical thrust of Paul's comment to the Galatian gentiles in 5:3 that it is incumbent upon any circumcised person to "keep the whole Law," if Paul did not, as a

circumcised person, hold himself to this standard. Otherwise, instead of being dissuaded from the course of proselyte conversion, the addressees may be expected to reply: "Why Paul? We simply want what you have: Jewish standing free from obligation to observe the Law!" Although specifically seeking to persuade these non-Jewish people not to become Law-people because of the inherent compromise of their confession of the meaning of Christ for themselves as gentiles, the implied logic of Paul's appeal rests upon the premise that they know him to observe, concomitant with his own circumcised identity, the whole Law.

Gagnon completes this argument with a warning: "In contemporary society, where it has become increasingly fashionable in scholarly circles to reshape Paul according to politically correct standards, historians need to be particularly sure that they are reconstructing accurately the 'historical Paul,' scandalous or not" (78). With this concern I agree. I assume that Gagnon has not overlooked that pre-contemporary based contemporary interpretations of Paul are also shaped by ideological values which privileged certain interpretations according to the standards of political correctness and the ruling elite of their time, and that the traditional interpretations to which he appeals are inherently anachronistic when measured against any concern to "reconstruct accurately the 'historical Paul,'" since they were developed apart from the historiographical aims and methods now recognized as essential to the exegetical task. Further, these earlier constructions were the products of interpreters who generally dismissed or even abhorred the Jewish people and their religious practices, including among themselves those who, in the not so distant past, fashioned Paul's voice to support an incomprehensive level of crimes against humanity considered by some of

them to be politically and legally compelling, much less correct. No interpretation is value-free; but we are responsible for choices we make.<sup>24</sup>

### C. “Weak” meaning “Stumbling”

I can find no significant criticism of my proposal that ἀσθένεια is better rendered in this case as stumbling, rather than weak, or that it refers to non-Christ-believing Jewish people. Gagnon offers some minor adjustments, such as that 14:4 indicates that the weak “are still standing upright through the Lord’s (Christ’s) help,” and that this “affirms that they have not yet stumbled” (79). Regardless of the fact that Paul’s statement in v. 4 can be read to imply that someone is already in need of the Lord’s help in order to be upheld (σταθήσεται is future passive), and the similar implication of 15:1, Paul’s language by nature communicates an interested perspective, indeed, identity is itself a social construction which is multifaceted, dependent upon the party and the point of view being expressed.<sup>25</sup> In other words, however translated or interpreted, this language is subjective as well as metaphorical. It is doubtful whether those being discussed as “weak/stumbling” would consider either their present situation or the outcome of their future response, if negative, constitute any such posture of weakness/stumbling, but more likely as exemplifying their strength. This verse may in fact indicate what I have claimed apart from this verbal inference. In the opinion of Paul and the strong/able-to-believe-ones to whom he writes the stumbling is already expressed in the life of those of Israel who do not share faith in Christ or in the proposed incorporation of gentiles as gentiles as though the end of

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<sup>24</sup> Instructive is Neil Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1994) 55-89.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g., Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996) 19-28.

the ages had dawned. It is the meaning and outcome of this development that Paul interprets differently than have those he addresses in Rome.

I have already answered this minor criticism anyway, in noting that this language for stumbling here is different from that of chapters 9—11, and that it brings to the fore an edge to Paul's employment of the terms.<sup>26</sup> Paul has moved from the figurative language of chapters 9—11, in which the current stumbling state of some Israelites is considered to be somehow according to God's inscrutable and to date unrecognized design, to articulating the subsequent issue of the attitude and behavior now incumbent upon these gentiles in view of the mercy they have received, and the knowledge of this mystery: they are to refrain from being the cause of stumbling, and to instead hold-up those suffering vicariously on their own behalf.

This particular topic should be especially critical for Gagnon's claim that my interpretation of the language of the weakness/stumbling "cannot" be. Yet the reader finds instead the concession that my proposal is "intriguing," even the generous comment that "it receives additional support," although "there are some problems." He admits that "the connotation of 'stumbling' is possible," although the referent is "not necessarily" as I propose, even if my interpretation adopts the "basic sense" of the term, and in conclusion notes that "the context must be decisive." But it is precisely the context that is under debate.

#### D. The Analogy of Abraham, Not Weak in Faith (Romans 4:19-21)

Gagnon agrees that the description of Abraham's faith in 4:19-21 is useful for interpreting chapter 14, even that "Nanos's interpretation is one plausible interpretation" (80). In other words, this "can" be. Could it

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<sup>26</sup> *Mystery of Romans*, 119-24.

be otherwise? Of course. But Abraham was not a “Christian,” and Gagnon’s effort to construe the identity of the weak/stumbling-in-faith-as-Christ-believing-yet-Torah-observing-*gentiles* seems strained throughout (80-81). If Robert Gagnon will but grant me the interpretive freedom that he asks for himself, this would be more than sufficient room to sustain the probability of exegesis I seek to claim, for he asks the reader of his proposal to recognize that “the story of Abraham, as an analogy, does not have to fit in all its particulars” (80). Indeed.

Why does Gagnon grant that weakness to regard Jewish diet as appropriate is still regarded by Paul as a matter of *faith*, when Gagnon has concluded that Paul no longer considered the practice of Law an expression of faith, since it was now obsolete for the Christ-believer? Is continued Law-observance then not sin, since “whatever is not of faith is sin” (14:23)? If continued Law-observance is not commensurate with the practice of faith in Christ, one wonders in what way the weak/stumbling may be described by Gagnon as those who “have proven themselves ‘strong’ with respect to ‘the promise of God’ concerning Christ” (80). Why should such faith be esteemed strong/able by Gagnon’s Paul if it remains Torah-observant, and thus opposed by Paul as not-faith?<sup>27</sup> They are then regarded as weak in *opinion* on what is dismissed by Paul, on Gagnon’s terms, as a matter of “indifference [*αδιάφορον*]” anyway (75, 81), but strong in faith in Christ where it is a matter of importance according to the measure of those who uphold the value of faith in Jesus Christ. One might wonder why Gagnon’s indifferent Paul thought that this extensive instruction about respecting the sensibilities of the weak/stumbling in faith, even if calculated by themselves to be in the service of the Lord, was warranted, instead of calling for the strong/able

to teach the weak/stumbling to recognize, by word and example, that the Law is obsolete and opposed to God's purpose, since its continued practice weakened or sickened faith.

### III. Conclusion

In his conclusion, Gagnon's argument implies that I have "alleged" Paul's "appeal" is to the weak/stumbling, but I have not done so, arguing instead that Paul's appeal is to the strong/able-to-believe-in-Christ, and he criticizes my not-position on the grounds that it is monotheistic in character rather than "a deeply christocentric appeal" (82). My case actually makes more central than the traditional readings the christological nature of the case Paul makes for the strong—the stumbling-over-faith-in-Jesus-Christ-ones—where Gagnon's position (with most others) actually moves the issue to a judgement of faith in the value or not of Law-observance. On Gagnon's definition, it is not about the question of the meaning of Jesus Christ, or the admission of gentiles as gentiles, since both weak/stumbling and strong/able are taken to be Christ-believers. Ironically, that approach results in devaluing of the christological basis of the group boundaries, for they do not provide the grounds for the controversy. Yet on my argument these differences of standing relative to Jesus as Christ are the matters that Paul's argument leading up to the exhortations of 12:1 ff. have clarified. And they have done so in a way that departs from the prevailing views among Jewish people outside of this coalition regarding what is really real in the present age, that is, apart from the belief that the age to come, when these things might be expected to occur, has dawned. The ability of this

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<sup>27</sup> A sympathetic critique of a similar failure of logic is expressed in Cranfield's response

reading to hold together the overall argument of the letter carries much more weight than Gagnon's response suggests.<sup>28</sup>

When Gagnon finally assesses the arguments against my view, so that it "cannot" be, one is confronted by a string of assertions that my interpretation is not "required." Indeed, it is not. I do not seek to claim otherwise. I have argued at length in *The Mystery of Romans*, elsewhere, and now in this rejoinder, for a historical-critical approach to a first-century Jewish document that offers a comprehensive reading of Paul's letter which is internally consistent while accounting for the available external evidence as well. Thus not just the possibility or plausibility of the proposal that the weak/stumbling of Romans are non-Christ-believing Jewish people "can" be claimed, but also the probability.<sup>29</sup>

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to an argument made by Barrett (*Romans*, 2.690-91).

<sup>28</sup> *Mystery of Romans*, 85-91, and the many arguments that turn on this issue in *The Romans Debate* (ed. Karl P. Donfried; Rev. Ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> I wish to express special thanks to Robert Brawley, William Campbell, Kevin Kiser, Mark Reasoner, and Peter Spitaler for commenting on a draft of this rejoinder; of course, culpability for the views expressed herein falls entirely upon me.