

The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter

Review Article in *The Journal of Beliefs and Values* 18.1 (1997) pp. 103-7.

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Over a century and a half ago, Ferdinand Christian Baur complained that Pauline studies labored under the inappropriate burden of having to undergird Christian dogmatics. His call for a thoroughly historical view of Paul is being answered today. A new era in Pauline scholarship has dawned since the publication of E. P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1977): references to 'the New Perspective on Paul' or to a 'paradigm shift' in Pauline studies now pepper the professional journals.

The letter to the Romans has only begun stubbornly to yield to newer perspectives, however. Long regarded as the theological manifesto for Paul's controversy with Judaism, a bulwark of the 'Lutheran' reading of Paul, Romans has only recently begun to be taken seriously as what it appears on its face to be: a letter directed to Gentile Christians in the imperial capital (see 1:6, 13, 15). That insight, first made programmatic by Johannes Munck and Lloyd Gaston, is the key to several recent comprehensive reinterpretations of the letter, including William S. Campbell's *Paul's Gospel in an Intercultural Context: Jew and Gentile in the letter to the Romans* (Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang, 1992); Stanley K. Stower's *A Rereading of Romans: justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994); and now Mark Nanos' *The Mystery of Romans: the Jewish context of Paul's letter* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996).

Nanos appreciates the new respect for Judaism evident among non-Jewish New Testament scholars, but laments that so few of them 'have understood Paul to share their new-found awareness. Paul is regarded implicitly, often explicitly, as an apostate' (p. 4), a term used explicitly by John G. Gager (*The Origins of Anti-Semitism* (New York, Oxford, 1985) and Alan Segal (*Paul the Convert: the Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990). In sharpest contrast, Nanos argues in *The Mystery of Romans* that the author of Romans is 'a thoroughly Jewish Paul, functioning entirely within the context of Judaism'. The dramatic reappraisal of Romans presented here is as impressive for its achievement as it is bold in its implications for contemporary churches, for as Nanos argues, 'Romans addressed an early manifestation of the (mis)perceptions of Israel and Jews among Christian gentiles that remain influential among many in modern gentitized Christianity' (p. 16).

Nanos finds the key to ‘the mystery of Romans’ in the ‘inseparable link’ between faith in Christ and Paul’s application of Judaic halakhah for defining the behavior incumbent upon Roman Christians as ‘righteous gentiles’ (p. 34). This key allows him to sketch in his first chapter a Pauline theology that is thoroughly Jewish. To be sure, other interpreters have observed Paul’s criticism of Gentile-Christian ‘boasting’ over Israel in Romans 11, and have recognized his call for an attitude of respect for the salvation-historical preeminence of Israel (‘to the Jew *first*’). Yet this theme is usually taken to be subordinate to Paul’s greater concern, to justify a law-free Gentile Christianity in the face of a supposed Jewish-Christian opposition. Thus an implicit contrast between Pauline ‘universalism’ and a misguided Jewish ‘particularism’ continues to govern scholarship on Paul.

In contrast, Nanos argues that in Romans Paul’s principal concern is to call gentiles to submit to the halakhah of the synagogue (p. 36). Archaeological and literary evidence suggests that in the first century the Jews of Rome were gathered in small synagogues, only loosely organized. Nanos suggests that these synagogues, often meeting in private houses (p. 47), were still the context in which gentile Christians would have heard Paul’s letter. These gentiles would have been expected to ‘meet the minimal requirements’ for association with Jews. Against the widespread assumption that the Christian movement broke early with strict Torah observance, Nanos takes Acts 15 as evidence that ‘the concept of “righteous gentiles” was operative at the time’ as a halakhic standard for participation in synagogue life, a standard to which gentile Christians would naturally have adhered (p. 55).

Two anticipated objections are addressed in appendices to the book. On the more conventional reading, the ‘Antioch incident’ (Gal. 2:11-21) shows Paul condemning Peter for accommodating Jewish sensibilities regarding kosher laws. The incident is thus a mainstay of the common judgment that Paul, and the mixed gentile-and-Jewish church he entered, had already gone far toward relativizing the Torah in their common life. Yet in Romans 14 Paul urges respect for observance of the kosher laws. The result, Nanos observes, is a hypocritical Paul (pp. 344-346). In place of this conventional reading, Nanos argues that the issue at Antioch was not that Peter (or Paul or any of the other Jewish Christians) had begun to eat food inconsistent with the apostolic decree, but that Peter had withdrawn from a (halakhically correct) fellowship with the gentiles, thus implying their inferior status (pp. 348-356).

In the second appendix Nanos disputes the standard view that in the wake of the so-called edict of Claudius there was in Rome no organized Jewish or Jewish-Christian community life in which the gentile addressees of Paul’s letter could have participated. Nanos considers it highly improbable that (as is often argued, or assumed) the edict could have selectively targeted a Jewish-Christian community, and impossible that the whole Jewish population of the city would have been decimated by the edict. Even if some Jewish or gentile Christians may have been caught up in it, the edict had no specific connection with Christians (p. 377). Most of the Jewish synagogues of Rome were thriving at the time of Paul’s letter, then, and embraced the gentile believers in Jesus whom Paul addressed.

The result of these historical arguments is that Paul faces neither a dominant gentile-Christian majority *or* an oppressive Jewish-Christian front in Rome. Rather Nanos finds evidence in Romans of ‘the kinds of tensions that would have been unfolding in synagogues as the Christian adherents grew in number and developed a subgroup identity’ and ‘more and more gentiles sought association as equals’ (p. 384). Such gentile Christians, still participating in synagogue life, might nevertheless have been easily swayed by the generally negative opinion of Jews held by their Roman neighbors (pp. 67-68).

This sketch of the historical situation provides the backdrop for the heart of the work, a pointed argument regarding the ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ of Romans 14—15 (chapter 3). Nanos brilliantly critiques the ‘almost universal agreement’ that *both* weak and strong were *Christians*, and that the ‘weakness’ in question was an inadequate appreciation on behalf of Jewish Christians of their freedom from Torah observance. In a telling survey (pp. 92-94), Nanos shows how Christian interpreters have routinely fallen into ‘Luther’s trap’, characterizing the Torah-observant ‘weak’ in patronizing or pejorative terms. This interpretation completely ignores Paul’s clear acknowledgment that the weak are ‘fully convinced’ that their observance is ‘for the Lord’ (Rom. 14:5), and contradicts Paul’s instruction that the strong not judge the weak. The result is ‘a theological double standard’: Gentiles may come to faith in Christ without becoming Jews, but Jews must give up Jewish identity to become Christian.

Some indication of how much is at stake here is evident in John M. G. Barclay’s chapter on Paul as ‘an anomalous Jew’ in *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: from Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE – 117 CE)* (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1996). Though he finds in Paul a powerful strain of ‘cultural antagonism’ toward the Hellenistic world, Barclay regards the discussion of ‘the weak’ in Romans 14 (whom he identifies with Jewish Christians) as evidence that Paul ‘hugely reduced’ the significance of Torah observance and ‘undercut the ideological basis’ of faithfulness to the law. Hand in hand with this reading goes Barclay’s judgment that ‘in social reality Paul’s churches were distinct from the synagogues, and their predominantly Gentile members unattached to the Jewish community’ (p. 389). Paul ‘radically expands—indeed threatens—the boundaries of that community’ (p. 389) in what Barclay elsewhere calls his critique of ‘Jewish cultural imperialism’.

Nanos rejects every element of this picture. The ‘weak’ of Romans 14 are not Jewish Christians who keep the law. Showing that in the Septuagint and Qumran literature alike, ‘weakness’ was parallel to ‘stumbling’, Nanos concludes that ‘the “weak” of 14:1—15:12 are the “stumbling” of 9:30-32’ (*Mystery of Romans*, p. 123). They are clearly Jews, though *not* Christians; indeed, they are Jews who have ‘stumbled’ over the confession of Jesus as messiah. Nevertheless Paul insists they have faith that must be respected by the strong, ‘*even if that faith is characterized as “weak”*’. The ‘strong’ on the other hand, hold ‘the kind of gentile prejudices toward Jews’ that were prevalent in Rome (p. 100). The result of Nanos’ argument is a truly ‘new perspective’ which respects ‘the integrity of Paul as a Jew’ (p. 154), and reveals how the paraenesis of 12:1 to 15:14 coheres with the theological argument of the letter (pp. 159-165).

This halakhic perspective is turned on the earlier, ‘theological’ chapters of Romans in chapter 4. In contemporary Judaism ‘righteous gentiles’ were accepted, ‘but they were certainly not equals’. Paul wanted to change that, as did the earliest Jesus movement in Jerusalem, as represented by the apostolic decree of Acts 15 (pp. 167-168; at greater length, pp. 201-215). What is new in Paul is not antagonism to Torah—to the contrary, the apostolic decree is ‘thoroughly Jewish’ (p. 173); nor is the eschatological belief that gentiles now shared with Jews as full members of the community of the Holy Spirit Paul’s innovation. Rather Paul ‘became the champion of a new understanding of Israel’ monotheism by applying the Shema of Israel and the apostolic decree’ to congregations that found themselves ‘quickly populated by a growing number of gentile participants’ (p. 174). The monotheism of the Shema is thus the heart of Paul’s theology.

Nanos insists at one point that Paul’s position ‘was *not* built around rejection of the Law’, but around ‘rejection of any ethnocentric limitation’ (p. 177). Here, as elsewhere in the book, James D. G. Dunn is cited. Despite occasional nods to the ‘New Perspective’, however, Nanos has remarkably little to say about this supposed ‘ethnocentric’ Jewish opposition, and it seems to play no significant role in his interpretation of Romans. Rather Nanos moves immediately to contrast Paul’s position with supersessionism of later *Gentile* Christianity (pp. 178-179). In this difference lies no small part of the significance of Nanos’ book. While the ‘New Perspective’ ordinarily sees the Paul of Romans *defending* gentile-Christian freedom against Jewish ‘ethnocentrism’, Nanos finds Paul *restraining* gentile-Christian freedom halakhically. Like other Pharisees, Paul applied ‘cultic purity to matters of everyday life and community’ (p. 194), so that even though the Christian gentiles of Rome were ‘not the people of Torah... it was still necessary for them to practice those dietary and sexual restrictions understood to be incumbent upon “righteous gentiles” associating with the Jewish community’ (p. 196).

Nanos extends his dramatically revisionist reading in the last two chapters of the book. Diverging from the customary reading of Romans 11, he does not find Paul ‘expecting the non-Christian Jews to be provoked to jealousy by gentile salvation’ (chapter 5); rather Romans shows the same two-step pattern—‘to the Jew *first*, and *also* to the Greek’—that Acts attributes to Paul’s mission. Rome is an exceptional case, however, in that Paul has not yet had an opportunity to preach to the synagogues. It is that opportunity that Paul wants to safeguard by urging the gentile Christians of Rome to conform halakhically with their synagogue environment.

Much of the work to this point rests on reading Romans 14 in terms of halakhah and refusing to fall into ‘Luther’s trap’. On some occasions, Nanos relies more on the inherent plausibility of his proposals than on lexical or exegetical detail. In connecting the ‘obedience of faith’ (Rom. 1:6) with the Apostolic Decree, for example, he notes that ‘the phrase is not found in this exact form before Paul’ (p. 121), alerting the reader not to expect a lexical argument. In chapter 6 Nanos moves further, however, to argue that Romans provides direct evidence that gentile Christians still frequented the synagogue. The ‘authorities’ to which Paul urges

submission in Rom. 13:1-7 are none other than the synagogue's *archons* and ministers (*leitourgoi*). Of course Nanos can point out that these verses stretch credulity if interpreted with secular rulers in mind (pp. 297-301). He can also build a plausible lexical case for various elements of the passage—the 'rulers' and what is 'due' to them—although his arguments for a metaphorical reading of 'bearing the sword' (Rom. 13:4) are strained, as he himself recognizes (pp. 310-314).

Nanos has done much more than present a remarkable series of new readings for future interpreters to take into account. *The Mystery of Romans* contributes to the demolition of the already crumbling 'Lutheran interpretation' of Paul, but also provides a viable alternative to the 'New Perspective' reading. The result is a coherent and persuasive new vision of both the letter and of Paul's theology.