

Panel Mark D. Nanos

### **The Mystery of Romans and Its Impact**

Kathy Ehrensperger, University of Basel

My journey with Mark and his research began with Paul ....and Bill! My journey with Paul began - without Paul. What I had to learn in German textbooks in the 1970ies and early 1980ies about Paul and his theology did not make sense to me. With feminism and social history on the rise in the early 80ies these provided me with hermeneutical paradigms I considered relevant for my reading of scriptural texts. But the so-called traditional view of Paul, Paulinism, although prevalent in the voices of Bultmann and Käsemann, did not capture what I was looking for: Theologizing in light of, and relevant for every day life. There were a number of encounters, not least in the context of Jewish-Christian Relations in Basel and Switzerland and internationally which eventually helped me to approach Paul – afresh. It was in the lectures of Ekkehard Stegemann on Romans in the Wintersemester of 1993/94 that I learned about something called the New Perspective – and about scholars like Charles Cranfield, Krister Stendahl, E.P.Sanders, Jimmy Dunn, etc. This made me curious. Beyond the borders of my home country. I learned that one of my New Testament teachers in Basel, Markus Barth, considered Paul to be and have remained a Jew – a good Jew even ! Had I missed something during my studies in Basel ? Most likely. But it is never too late to catch up. And surprisingly there was at the same time a move in feminist theology which also began to approach Paul from a different perspective: Luise Schottroff had published an article ‘Gesetzesfreies Heidenchristentum und die Frauen ? Feministische Analysen und Alternativen’,<sup>1</sup> in 1996. I began to get interested in Paul in light of feminism and the need to overcome antisemitism especially within the guild of biblical studies and hence the church. The person who introduced me to Mark’s work was Bill Campbell– who like Ekkehard Stegemann for a long time (since the late 1960ies) had already embarked on the journey of reading Paul in a way that did not promote Anti-Judaism/antisemitism. Mark’s *Mystery of Romans* was a wave of fresh air when I first read it – possibly in 1997 or 1998. Here was a colleague who read this letter without the overload of centuries of hermeneutical Christian theological presuppositions: such as a dichotomy between law and

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<sup>1</sup> In *Von der Wurzel getragen. Christlich-feministische Exegese in Auseinandersetzung mit Anti-Judaismus*, Luise Schottroff, Marie-Therese Wacker eds., Leiden: Brill 1996, 227-45.

gospel, of supersessionism etc. I consider this to be one of the greatest contributions of Mark's work on Paul (and that of fellow Jewish New Testament scholars) : reading Paul's letters really afresh. This meant taking seriously that these letters were written before 70 CE and of course before any of the Christian Creeds which eventually set the hermeneutical framework for the interpretation of these letters within the church.

With *The Mystery of Romans* Mark took me on a journey that felt like travelling through a somewhat familiar landscape – but on new paths, paths that did not exist before – that I had not noticed – or not seen clearly. Daring to explore these paths or paving a way, or setting up hooks so others could also climb along these routes contributed significantly to see the familiar landscape in an entirely new light, from different angles and perspectives, etc., and even more – to see aspects and things not seen before. To see differently, through different lenses or in the image of mountain climbers to set you new hooks requires people who take the risk to explore such new pathways. Mark is one of those 'pathfinders'. Irrespective of whether I agree with all the details of his research, this is the contribution of Mark's *Mystery Book* to my journey with Paul, and I am sure to that of many others. He set up hooks in the rock of Romans for me to climb – and enabled me to set up further hooks – maybe a bit a side from his – here and there possibly deviate from his path – but in the same direction. It was a great delight getting to know Mark in person – I think it was at SBL in Denver in 2001. This is not a lonely path – we are travel companions on this path - and it is a great privilege for me to have shared and continue to share this path also with Mark.

*The Mystery of Romans* was Mark's first major publication. There Mark convincingly demonstrated that Paul was thoroughly Jewish 'functioning entirely within the context of Judaism, giving priority to Israel, even willing to give his life in the place of the Jewish people in the tradition of Moses to ensure their irrevocable stature as God's beloved for whom restoration was certain.' (9) The Torah was God's gift to Israel, the Jews Torah observance was in response to God's mercy....(9).

Moreover, Mark was among the first scholars who took really seriously that Romans is addressed to non-Jewish Christ-followers only. Although such affirmations are already found in Johannes Munck and Walter Kümmel<sup>2</sup>, and of course Stanley Stowers, Mark not merely stated this and then continued to read Romans as nevertheless addressing issues about all

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<sup>2</sup> That the letter was addressed to mainly gentiles Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9-11*, Philadelphia: Fortress 1967, Werner Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, Nashville: Abingdon 1966, and only to gentiles Stan Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans. Justice, Jews and Gentiles*, New Haven: Yale University Press 1994.

humankind (as is so often the case ). He demonstrated how this recognition (shared widely today) changed the interpretation of the entire letter (not widely shared today). The letter addresses specific issues arising among these non-Jewish Christ-followers in Rome. Mark sees them as part of synagogue communities in Rome, kind of sub-groups, under the authority of synagogue authorities. This means that of course Jewish issues are addressed in the letter, but not directed at Jews, but directed at non-Jews, that is those from the nations, in Christ (78-84). Thus, in this context the letter ‘addressed an early manifestation of (mis-) perceptions of Israel and Jews among Christian gentiles’ (15). Paul’s concern is not a *Jewish question*, but a *gentile question*! (An aspect which has later been taken up by Matt Thiessen – *Paul and the Gentile Problem*). In *The Mystery of Romans* Mark states ‘The gentiles addressed are guilty of this kind of error and hypocrisy when they assume that they are now victorious, supplanting Israel as the people of God’. (11, 99) ‘Romans is not a call to deny the place of Israel, nor is a treatment of the threat of “judazing” among the new Christian gentiles in Rome....Romans is rather a call to the newly believing Christian gentiles of Rome to recognize the preeminent place of Israel, the historical people of God.....’(38).

That the key problem addressed in Romans was an early development of what later became known as the church doctrine of supersessionism had never been expressed as clearly before as far as I am aware. Bill Campbell had argued in his 1990 book, *Paul’s Gospel in an Intercultural Context*,<sup>3</sup> that in Romans the notion that Israel is rejected is refuted as is any perception that the church is now the true Israel. These were lonely voices in the desert of Paulinism at that time – and Mark made a powerful claim that this is precisely what Romans addressed: the beginning of supersessionism. Ekkehard Stegemann had expressed this view already in his Habilitationsschrift of 1981 – but this was unknown to a wider audience, since it was never published during his life-time and is only now (2025) available in print. This voice would certainly not have been heard in the German academic scene at the time.<sup>4</sup>

The Mystery is a rich source of a pioneering approach to Romans – I can only highlight a few additional key aspects here, in addition to the main powerful insights just mentioned, that is, the addressees are gentiles only, and the letter fights against supersessionism among these gentile Christ-followers.

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<sup>3</sup> William S. Campbell, *Paul’s Gospel in an Intercultural Context. Jew and Gentile in the Letter to the Romans*, Bern et.al.: Peter Lang 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Ekkehard W. Stegemann, *Der eine Gott und die eine Menschheit. Israels Erwählung und die Erlösung von Juden und Heiden nach dem Römerbrief*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 2025 (first time publication of his Habilitationsschrift of 1981).

Mark sees Paul as teaching these gentiles in Christ as ‘righteous gentiles’ how to live their lives now in relation to the God of Israel. He teaches ‘halakha’ for those from the nations. His long chapter on the weak and the strong in Rome argues that the weak in faith are not Christ-followers but Jews not convinced of the Christ event. Be this as it may, there are insights Mark draws from this that are convincing irrespective of the identity of ‘the weak and the strong’ respectively. He concludes that ‘Romans 5.1-8.39 addresses Christian gentiles who are now safely included in God’s election as “righteous gentiles” without becoming Jews, with the responsibility that this implies to live on behalf of rather than over against the other – in this case the non-Christian Jews.’(162). This is the ethos valid now for non-Jews in Christ in relation to Jews – whether these are convinced of Christ or not. Mark calls this the guiding principle halakha “for the righteous gentiles” in the midst of the faithful of Israel as applied by Paul to the Christian gentiles he addressed in Rome’ (179). This ethos for gentiles in Christ is based on the unwavering conviction of the Oneness of God, that is, the Shema. Thus the insistence that gentiles in Christ should on no account become Jews is based precisely on this conviction. It has nothing to do with the Torah not being valid anymore, or that there is anything wrong with Jewish tradition. To become Jewish on the part of non-Jews, now that messianic time had arrived would ‘deny the election of Israel’, and thus the oneness of God.’ His Oneness is compromised if he is only the God of Israel, .....and not also the God of the nations’ (184). Thus ‘Paul’s monotheistic reasoning clearly lies behind his entire argument throughout Romans....’(192).

The key problem with the Roman misunderstanding of the gospel, the supersessionist self-perception of those from the nations in Christ, was that it was so detrimental that it impacted on the perception of Jews who were not convinced that in Christ messianic time had arrived. Paul is concerned that this might hinder them to see what he and his fellow workers see, that the incoming of those from the nations was an indication of the beginning of messianic time, and thus Jews and non-Jews in Christ could glorify the one God on Israel and the nations together. In Mark’s view, which I find convincing, this is what Paul expects of fellow Jews that they ‘recognized that the promised ingathering of the nations had begun.’ (18). Although Paul sees himself called as apostle to the nations, he thus hopes for some impact of this conviction of the beginning of messianic time in Christ upon fellow Jews (Rom 11.13-14).

There are of course a number of critical questions that could be raised – not all of Mark’s perceptions are convincing to me: are the weak really unconvinced Jews ? Are the authorities

really synagogue authorities ? But these are minor issues which of course can be debated controversially. And since the late 1990ies the terminology we use has changed – Paul within Judaism scholars now avoid the terms Christian, church etc when referring to the time of Paul and the first century CE in general. But these are really only minor issue compared with the ground-breaking innovative approach Mark put in print in 1996.

The *Mystery of Romans* was the beginning of the impact of Mark's work on a now wide range of scholarship. He refined his approach in many subsequent publications and detailed analyses of the olive tree metaphor, the so-called 'hardening', *erga nomou* etc., pointing to numerous questionable translations, and sometimes even text-critical choices (p46!) with devastating impacts throughout the reception history of the letter. Mark's work together with that of a growing number of colleagues has led to the coming together of scholars under the label the *Paul within Judaism School*. Mark was instrumental in setting up the SBL Paul within Judaism Section. Mark created the label, trying to capture in a short phrase that this group of scholars was not merely reacting against earlier approaches but was as already noted, creatively exploring new paths. That this label would trigger such critical debates as is currently evident could certainly not be envisaged at the time. Colleagues embrace it – associate with it, are part of it but there are not surprisingly those who question such a label, ask what his actually means , how do we use it etc. These questions and debates are helpful, when conducted in a cooperative spirit, in that they sharpen aspects, point at blind spots and thus contribute to clarify the approaches subsumed under this label now. The fact that there is such a debate going on by now indicates that the impact of Mark's work and that of his fellow travelers cannot be ignored anymore by the guild. They may be sympathetic, or not, embrace it or not, that Paul was an remained a Jew and that his letters need to be read from this hermeneutical presupposition is hardly doubted anymore. Despite critical debates and questions, Pauline scholars cannot ignore this approach in its many colors anymore. Mark decisively contributed to this ground-breaking paradigm change in New Testament scholarship. But celebrating his work cannot be the end of the story! It actually means that it is necessary to continue to clear the pathway, set up new hooks, explore the hidden routes and unseen details. The paradigm change is only the beginning – and celebrating every now and then along the route is a reason to pause for a moment, be thankful for the pioneering work that Mark has done – and continue the journey, strengthened by such moments as this one today!

