

St. Paul's Letter to the Romans

An Introduction to the Why and Background

“For too long we have read scripture with nineteenth-century eyes and sixteenth-century questions. It's time to get back to reading with first-century eyes and twenty-first century questions (Wright, 21).” – N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision*, IVP Academic, 2009.

“Taking a few favorite verses here and there, tearing them out of the context, and making them into pretext for some or other point is simply bad reading (Jennings, 8).”

Paul had a different worldview from his readers. Paul had no clue of the issues we face in the 21st century.

“Thus, an important part of the difficulty in reading Paul is that he self-consciously shapes his argument in accordance with the worldview that he supposes to characterize his listeners or readers (Jennings, 10).”

“Whatever the actual ethnic makeup of the ekklesia in Rome, Paul addressed his letter solely and explicitly to its gentiles, while insisting on his own divinely granted authority to do so (Fredriksen, 155).”

“Romans speaks most directly not to the justification of sinners in general, but to the justification specifically of gentiles-in-Christ. Romans is Paul's resounding declaration of the gracious inclusion of the nations in the impending redemption of all Israel, Paul's 'kinsmen according to the flesh' (Rom. 9:4, 11:26) (Fredriksen, 157).”

Paul writes to communities, not individuals!

“In his letters, he rarely speaks to individuals but establishes corporate consciousness by speaking to the whole church. English translations obscure the fact that, with rare exceptions (cf. Romans 2:1-16; 8:2), he speaks only in the second-person plural (Thompson, 17).”

“As an apostle who preaches where Christ has not been named, he does not speak of individual conversions but speaks of the establishment of churches. Thus he knows of no believer who is not affiliated with a community (Thompson, 17).”

“Paul's challenge, particularly in Galatians and Romans, is to offer an alternative understanding of community (Thompson, 18).”

“Paul's task was to define the community of believers in ways that did not conform to the ancient concepts of community. When he converted people from different social classes and ethnic groups, he formed a community that was unparalleled in the ancient world. Thus his task was to build lasting communities, and his letters are attempts at ecclesial self-definition that challenged the common views of community (Thompson, 19).”

The way that Luther interacted and wrote about Paul is more of a reflection on Luther and his own issues. Paul would have argued with Luther's conclusions about his interpretation of Romans.

“In chapter 5 I will describe the communal dimension of Paul's doctrine of justification. As the scholarship of the last generation has shown, the doctrine of justification was not primarily an individual concern but a corporate matter that would redefine the nature of community. Justification by faith was a foundation for Paul's view of the church as the community in which ethnic and social barriers are erased. His vision of united church composed of Jews and Gentiles was based on the doctrine of justification (Thompson, 21).”

“Thus although Luther found the answer to his own guilt in Paul's doctrine of the righteousness of God, Paul never describes the righteousness of God is the answer to the individual's guilty conscience (Thompson, 129).”

Paul's letters have been co-opted and hijacked. The ways that Paul's words have been abused are numerous and at times horrific.

“Given the history in which the apostle's voice has again and again rung out like an iron to enforce the will of slaveholders or to legitimate violence against women, Jews, homosexuals, or pacifist... the voice we have learned to accept as Paul's is the voice of the sanctified status quo (so) that continued efforts to reclaim Paul's genuine voice are necessary. For centuries the apostle's legacy has been systematically manipulated by human structures of domination and oppression, from the conservative interpreters of Paul who found their way into the New Testament itself, down to the legitimation of the 'New World Order' or the sonorous waves of antifeminist backlash in our own time... (Neil Elliot, *Liberating Paul*, 1994).”

One challenge of reading any document is to put oneself in the mind of the writer. This act is unthinkable, even in modern times. To do so with a two thousand year old document is impossible.

Resources:

Fredriksen, Paula, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle*, Yale University Press, 2017

Jennings, Theodore W. Jr., *Outlaw Justice: The Messianic Politics of Paul*, Stanford University Press, 2013.

Thompson, James W., *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ*, Baker Academic, 2014.