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Paul’s Redefinition of Jewish Identity
(Romans 2:17-29)


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"What do you say to St Paul, itching with a Jewishness he couldn’t scratch away until he’d turned half the world against it?"

“I say thank you, Paul, for widening the argument.”

Libor and Finkler, The Finkler Question

The relationship between Paul’s Jewish identity and his Christ-identity is complex and disputed. I argue that Paul neither affirms Jewish identity as it stands nor rejects the value of Jewish distinctiveness altogether. Rather, Paul redefines Jewish identity in light of the gospel of Christ. For Paul, Jewishness retains a distinctive value (e.g. Rom 3:1-2). However, this value should not be conceived principally in terms of salvation. Rather, Jewish identity should be understood primarily in terms of a special divine vocation (i.e. a role or task in the world) which springs from the law as a gift of divine revelation. Thus there is a close relationship between Paul’s Jewish identity and his apostleship. Romans 2:17-29, which is located in the social context of the synagogue, is intended by Paul as a summary of his redefinition of Jewish identity.

Part A: Paul’s Redefinition of Jewish Identity

1. Paul the Jew?

The Apostle Paul was a Jew who fought with Jews. At certain key points in his letters, Paul emphatically asserts his Jewish identity. He describes Jews as his brothers, his family, his race, and his flesh. He grieves for Jews, prays for Jews, seeks to win Jews, works alongside Jews, and shapes his ministry in service of

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1 Jacobson 2010.
2 Most notably Rom 11:1, 2 Cor 11:22.
3 Rom 9:3.
5 2 Cor 11:26, Gal 1:14.
7 Rom 9:1-3.
8 Rom 10:1.
9 1 Cor 9:20, cf. 1 Cor 1:22-23 (Watson 2007, 72-73).
Part A: Paul’s Redefinition of Jewish Identity

Jews. Yet he also fights his fiercest battles with Jews. In the course of these battles, he abandons Jewish commitments, trivialises Jewish lifestyles, curses preachers of Jewish circumcision, “dies” to the Jewish law and at times seemingly renounces his Jewish identity altogether.

At first glance, Paul’s varied statements about Jewishness seem mutually incompatible. They certainly constitute a wide spectrum, from heartfelt identification through to bitter denunciation. Not surprisingly, then, scholars have come to many different conclusions about Paul’s Jewishness. Those who examine Paul’s overall worldview, for example, often conclude that Paul has recognisably Jewish convictions. Mark Nanos, who is concerned with Paul’s attitude towards other Jews, concludes that Paul never challenged Jewish Torah observance; thus Paul was a “good Jew.” John Barclay, on the other hand, who is concerned with whether Paul’s Jewish contemporaries accepted him as Jewish, concludes that they did not; thus Paul was an apostate Jew. Love Sechrest, moreover, asks about Paul’s group affiliation, and concludes that he felt a deeper kinship bond with the Christian community than with the Jewish community; and so Paul is a “former Jew.”

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12 Rom 15:31; 2 Cor 11:22, 24; Gal 6:12-13; Phil 3:2-6; 1 Thess 2:14-16.
16 Gal 2:19.
17 Phil 3:5-8.
18 Räisänen (2008, 319-22) demonstrates the diversity and apparent contradiction in Paul’s stance towards “Judaism.”
20 Nanos 1996, 9, citing Barth (1979). See also Rudolph (2011), who critiques the “consensus” reading of 1 Cor 9:19-23 and argues that Paul did not necessarily abandon a Torah-observant lifestyle. Rather, consistent with contemporary Jewish practice of “accommodation”, Paul ate with Gentiles but did not personally transgress the Mosaic food laws. See also Eisenbaum 2009; Rudolph 2010.
22 Sechrest 2009, 157-64. Cf. Sanders (1983, 171-79) who argues that even though Paul did not intend to make the church into a third race, his ministry inevitably had this effect.
Even this small selection of scholarship demonstrates that the question of Paul’s Jewishness can be asked, and answered, in many different ways. This plurality is not in itself problematic. After all, each of the various aspects of Paul’s Jewishness which scholars choose as a focus for study represents a legitimate scholarly concern, and provides valuable, discrete insights. Nevertheless, the question of Paul’s Jewishness is not easy to confine; it has the unsettling tendency to break through narrowly defined areas of scholarly concern. Because it is such a significant topic, individual pronouncements about Paul’s Jewishness in one area often influence studies in many other areas of Paul’s life and thought—his theology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, hermeneutics, missiology, social views, etc.23

In my overall dissertation, I am taking yet another approach to the question of Paul’s Jewishness. I am seeking to investigate Paul’s Jewish identity; that is, I am seeking to understand who Paul himself thought he was, in light of his Jewish context.24 My aim is to identify similarities and differences between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries, and to discern how these similarities and differences generate Paul’s own individual Jewish identity.

Of course, my approach, like any other, is selective. My primary aim is to understand aspects of Paul’s own Jewish identity, not to judge his Jewishness against an independent, external standard (historical or otherwise). Nevertheless, despite its selectivity, an approach based on identity is capable of making significant contributions to other areas of Pauline studies. This is precisely because the approach seeks to understand Paul’s own personal perspective on Jewishness. It therefore provides immediate points of integration with other areas of his life, his thought and his influence.

23 Hagner (2007) discusses the way in which Paul’s Jewishness is inseparable from other key areas of his life and thought.

24 Cf. Dunn’s question: “Who did Paul think he was?” (1999, 174-77). My approach is informed by the notion of social identity, which conceives of an individual’s identity in a dialogical relationship with his or her social world through a dynamic interplay of similarity and difference. For general discussions of social identity, see Giddens 1993; Jenkins 2008; Lawler 2008. See also the foundational work of Berger and Luckmann (1971, 194-96), discussed and critiqued by Horrell (2001). Like Meeks (1983, 5), our use of social theory will be “suggestive, rather than generative.”
Part A: Paul’s Redefinition of Jewish Identity

The notion of identity is, in fact, particularly valuable for examining the numerous elements of conflict and dissonance in Paul’s statements about Jewish identity. Theorists frequently describe identity formation as an evolutionary process, a constant interaction between individuals and their social “world” which changes both the individuals and the world. We can examine Paul in these terms, as an agent of identity, who by his apostolic ministry is both reproducing older conceptions of Jewish identity and simultaneously creating newer conceptions.

2. Paul’s gospel and his Jewish identity

However, Paul’s identity-shaping activities are more drastic and disruptive than might be suggested by a term such as “evolutionary.” Paul is convinced that something revolutionary has occurred in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, an event which he proclaims in his “gospel.” This radical Christ-event pervades Paul’s letters and undergirds both his own identity and his conception of his readers’ identities. It creates new communities with new social realities. It even challenges elements of Jewish distinctiveness. Paul’s Jewish identity, therefore, cannot be understood without reference to this even more fundamental Christ-identity. The relationship between Paul’s Jewish and “Christian” identities has itself been conceived in different ways by different scholars.

25 E.g. Giddens (1993): “Every act which contributes to the reproduction of structure is also an act of production, a novel enterprise, and as such may initiate change by altering that structure at the same time as it reproduces it—as the meanings of words change in and through their use.” (134)
26 E.g. Rom 1:1-7; 1 Cor 15:1-11; Gal 1:1-5; 1 Thess 1:4-10; etc.
27 E.g. Rom 14:1-15:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Phil 2:1-11; etc.
29 Barclay (2010) contends that in Galatians, “The Christ-gift is the fulfilment of the divine promises to Abraham, but is neither prepared for nor conditioned by Israel’s prior history” (53). Jewish identity, then, as expressed in Torah-observance, can no longer be seen as something intrinsically valuable in and of itself. Ethnicity, including and especially Jewishness, “retains no value, as a mark of status, within the new reality created by the gift” (50).
30 Henceforth we will use the adjective “Christian” as shorthand for “pertaining to faith in relation to Jesus Christ” (cf. Rom 3:22). Although the term “Christ-believing” would be closer to Paul’s usage, it is too cumbersome to use repeatedly.
31 For the feasibility of the idea that Paul could have multiple, nested identities, see Hodge (2005).
According to Mark Nanos, for example, Paul’s view of Christian identity provides little direct challenge to Jewish identity at all. The “Christians” to whom Paul is writing are non-Torah-observant synagogue-attending “righteous Gentiles.” In Romans, Paul is urging these gentiles to regard the “weak,” i.e. non-Christian Jews, as brothers and sisters “in faith”; hence the Christians should respect the Jewish identity of their brothers and sisters while seeking to win them for Christ if they can. It has been demonstrated that there are a number of significant flaws with Nanos’ proposal, most seriously in aspects of his exegesis of Rom 14:1-15:6. Nanos’ proposal, therefore, while provocative, ultimately lacks firm exegetical support.

Daniel Boyarin, on the other hand, argues that Paul’s gospel is a universalistic “system” which effectively (if not quite intentionally) supersedes and eradicates Jewish identity by rendering any concept of Jewish distinctiveness meaningless. Boyarin, it must be said, has self-consciously limited himself to reading Paul through the lens of Gal 3:28-29, which affirms the relative unimportance of Jewish distinction. Boyarin does not fully explore the significance of Paul’s closely argued affirmations of on-going Jewish advantage (e.g. Rom 3:1-2, 9:4-5, 11:28-29). Nevertheless, Boyarin’s challenge must be recognised by anyone who seeks to examine Paul’s view of Jewish identity.

A number of scholars have attempted to reconcile Paul’s affirmation of the unity of Jew and Gentile in Christ with his statements about an on-going, distinct, Jewish identity. William Campbell, Philip Esler and Bruce Hansen, in different ways and

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32 Nanos 1996.
33 See also Nanos 2010. Nanos argues that Paul and his Christian contemporaries were claiming “that non-Jews, by way of their response to the gospel of Christ, have become included in the Jewish communities, in Judaism, as equal members, apart from them becoming Jews, that is, without undertaking proselyte conversion” (157). Nanos’ article is nuanced and at points persuasive, but continued insistence on using terms of Jewish identity such as “Judaism” to describe the Christian communities as a whole seems strained and paradoxical.
36 Boyarin 1994, 5-6.
37 Texts such as these are discussed by Stowers (1994, 129-34).
Part A: Paul’s Redefinition of Jewish Identity

with different emphases, argue that Paul affirms Jews as members of an ethnic group whose distinction from non-Jews must be protected within the Christian community. Gentiles do not have to become Jews in order to be Christian; but neither do Christian Jews have to give up their Jewish identity. In order for Paul’s vision to be put into effect, however, the Mosaic law must be divested of its theological significance. According to these interpreters, Paul views the law of Moses simply as a set of cultural norms and practices which must be affirmed within his multicultural Christian communities.

While the studies I have just mentioned are thorough and insightful attempts to account for Paul’s affirmations of a distinct place for Jewish identity within the Christian community, in the end they are still subject to Boyarin’s critique. They claim that Paul both denied any kind of ultimate theological significance to the Mosaic law and that he also affirmed a distinct ethnic identity for Jews. However, this does not fit with what we know about Paul’s understanding of Jewishness. When Paul asserts the value of a distinct Jewish ethnic identity, he implies that this identity is closely bound up with the theological significance of the Mosaic law (e.g. Rom 3:1-2, 9:4-5, 11:28-29). Given his Pharisaic background, Paul would also have been intimately aware that any suggestion that the law should be robbed of its theological significance entirely would cause uproar amongst his Jewish contemporaries. Paul, in other words, could not have denied any ultimate theological significance to the Mosaic law without destroying the distinctiveness of Jewish identity. But, as we have seen, Paul did affirm the value of Jewish identity.

39 This is despite Hansen’s claim that he has answered Boyarin (2010, 60-62, 103-04, 202).
40 Given Paul’s background as a Pharisee (Phil 3:5-6) and “zealot,” υἱοὶ ἰσραήλ (Gal 1:13-14), he must have been aware that his negative statements concerning the law would immediately threaten the core of Jewish ethnic identity and thus risk intense social disharmony, even in the short term. Thus Paul’s statements cannot be explained simply as part of a well-intentioned conflict-reduction strategy which only later caused unintended problems for Jewish identity, as claimed by Esler (2003, 354-56) and Campbell (2006, 116). Cf. Acts 6:13-14, 13:38-47, 18:13-15, which imply that even before Paul wrote to the Romans, the gospel had been “preached in a form that implied an ‘unorthodox’ view of the Law” which induced heated conflict, and may well have contributed significantly to the disturbances which led to the expulsion of the Jews under Claudius “at the instigation of Chrestus.” (Suetonius 1914-1920, Claud. 25.4) (Hvalvik 2007, 182).
41 “To render a practice that was so central to Jewish identity ultimately unnecessary implies a similar judgment regarding that identity itself” (Das 2003, 78; cf. Barclay 1996a, 308). While this
3. The vocational dimension of Jewish identity

This, in turn, must imply that Paul saw some theological value in the law of Moses.42

What, then, was Paul doing with the law, and thus with Jewish identity? I have argued that he wasn’t simply affirming it as it stood (Nanos), or dissolving it in a Hellenistic sea of universalism (Boyarin), or preserving it in a relativised ethnic form by removing its deep theological significance (Esler, Campbell, Hansen). In my dissertation, I argue that Paul is doing something else with the law and with Jewish identity. He is simultaneously affirming that Jewish identity and the law have immense theological significance, and is profoundly redefining the nature of that theological significance, in light of the gospel of Christ. My research, therefore, is an exploration of how this transformed understanding of the law and Jewish identity informs Paul’s activity as apostle and gospel preacher. What, in other words, does Paul see as the on-going significance of distinctive Jewishness?

3. The vocational dimension of Jewish identity

The theological value which Paul ascribes to Jewishness is clearly not soteriological in any straightforward sense. Paul repeatedly declares that Jewish identity is not a deciding factor in a person’s salvation,43 justification,44 divine inheritance45 or membership in the Christian community;46 since these things are all obtained through Christ regardless of whether one is a Jew. What, then, is the value of being Jewish for Paul?

I contend that the concept of a divine vocation for Israel undergirds many of Paul’s discussions of Jewish identity. The word “vocation” or “calling” in this context is meant to refer to any kind of conviction that God has given Israel a special role or

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42 So Das 2003, 141. Das does outline a positive vision for the Mosaic law in the life of Christians in general (166-186) but doesn’t explore the implications of Paul’s view of the law for the on-going existence of a distinct Jewish identity in Paul’s communities. It is our intention to explore this issue further.


44 E.g. Rom 3:29-30.


46 E.g. 1 Cor 12:13.
task within his wider purposes. The concept is referred to and developed by a number of scholars, especially those who are particularly conscious of a Jewish perspective in their biblical interpretation. Such scholars speak of exclusive Jewish cultural practice as a “task and calling in the world” or as a distinct “vocation,” κλήσις, within the Christian community, a vocation that is not coterminous with God’s “call to salvation.” The purpose of this “special call” is to promote God’s wider purposes in the world not simply to create an inward-looking “triumphant exclusivism.”

A sense of Israel’s vocation is usually closely related to the conviction that the law of Moses, and the scriptures more generally, are a gift of divine revelation to Israel. Since God has uniquely revealed himself to Israel in the law, Israel has a unique task to perform in response to that law. The exact nature of Israel’s response was conceived in different ways by Paul’s Jewish contemporaries; e.g. obedience to the law, enforcing purity, mediating divine wisdom to Gentile, etc. I contend that Paul affirms that the revelation of the law to Israel provides them with a unique gift and thus a significant divine vocation. However, in light of the gospel of Christ, Paul radically redefines the significance of the law, and so also redefines the nature of Israel’s distinct vocation.

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47 Boyarin 1994, 32.
49 Nanos 1996, 9. An emphasis on the vocation of Israel is also a feature of the work of Stanley Stowers and N. T. Wright, although their particular interpretations of the nature of Israel’s vocation and its relationship to Israel’s salvation are problematic. Stowers (1994, 189-91, 299-300, 06-12) claims that Paul is only wrestling with vocational issues and not with soteriological issues. However, Stowers does not deal adequately with Paul’s very strong statements about the soteriological nature of Israel’s problem (e.g. Rom 3:20; 10:21; 11:20, 23) and his clear concerns about Israel’s salvation (e.g. 9:3, 10:1) (Longenecker 2007, 27-31). For other critiques of the Sonderweg approach of which Stowers is a representative see Räisänen (1988, 180); Hvalvik (1990); Donaldson (2006, 39-44). Wright (1991, 20-21, 231-57) conceives of Israel’s divine vocation primarily in terms of incorporation. Israel’s greatest sin (which nevertheless achieved God’s purposes) was her failure to include Gentiles; her positive role is to incorporate others into herself, thereby becoming God’s new saved humanity, the church. Wright’s particular conception of Israel’s vocation ultimately undercuts the very issue we are trying to address: the value of a distinct identity for Jewish identity within Christian identity. Israel’s ultimate vocation, for Wright, is precisely to abandon her distinctiveness. This is because Wright connects Israel’s vocation with incorporation, which is a unifying concept, rather than with revelation, which is a more distinctive concept.

To reiterate: Paul did not conceive of the distinct value of Jewishness principally in terms of salvation, but rather in terms of a special vocation springing from a unique divine revelation. For many other Jews in Paul's context, such a distinction between vocation and salvation would have been largely irrelevant, since Israel's response to the divine revelation of the law was thought to lead to salvation in a fairly straightforward manner. However, in Paul's discussions of Jewish identity, it is important to distinguish soteriological and vocational elements. This is because Paul views the relationship between the law-revelation and salvation as contentious and problematic. For Paul, the possibility that Israel's response to the law may achieve God's purposes in the world but not thereby ensure salvation for Israel itself is a topic of intense discussion, especially in his letter to the Romans.
Part B: Romans 2:17-29

In Rom 2:17-29, many of the key interpretative puzzles associated with the complex relationship between Paul’s Christian identity and his Jewish identity rise to particular prominence. This passage appears within a letter whose overarching theme is the Christian gospel; yet the passage itself is a discussion of Jewishness. Many contemporary exegetes therefore assume that Paul’s aim here is to demonstrate that the true “Jews” are in fact all Christians, not ethnic Jews. Daniel Boyarin, while agreeing with this line of interpretation, points out that it therefore constitutes an effective dissolution of Jewish identity. I have maintained, however, that Boyarin’s interpretation does not take Paul’s affirmations of ongoing Jewish advantage into account. In fact, Paul’s very next statement—Rom 3:1-2—is a strong affirmation of Jewish advantage. I contend, rather, that Paul should be seen as redefining Jewish identity in light of the Christian gospel without thereby denying its distinctiveness. In fact, I wish to argue that that Rom 2:17-29 itself constitutes a carefully crafted summary of this very process of Jewish identity redefinition in light of the gospel.

In the remainder of this paper, I will locate this passage within its context in Romans, describe its intended social setting and purpose, and then present my key conclusions about the nature of Paul’s redefinition of Jewish identity.

1. The location of Romans 2:17-29 within the argument of Romans

Paul’s thematic statement in Rom 1:16-17 shows that the Jew-Gentile dynamic is an important factor in his gospel presentation. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation “to everyone who believes, both to the Jew first, Ἰουδαῖον, and also to the Greek.” On the one hand, this means that believing Jews and Greeks are united in salvation through the gospel. On the other

51 Rom 1:1-5, 1:16-17.
53 Boyarin 1994, 94-95.
54 Rom 1:16-17 is the thematic statement of Romans (Cranfield 1975, 1.87-102; Dunn 1988, 1.37; Fitzmyer 1993, 98; Jewett 2007, vii; Moo 1996, 63-79; Schreiner 1998, 58-76).
hand, within this fundamental unity, Jews have a certain pre-eminence. This signals a dialectic between Jewish equality and Jewish pre-eminence which remains active in Paul’s subsequent discussions.

In Rom 2:1-16, Paul envisages a representative judgmental human being, actively condemning members of his surrounding society. A Jewish figure is probably envisaged here; nevertheless he is addressed as ἄνθρωπος in order to highlight his equality with Gentiles with respect to the criteria by which God will judge him. Paul argues that Jewish status and possession of the law provides no special protection from God’s judgment. The function of Romans 2:1-16, as a whole, is to deny salvific advantage to Jews who possess the law. God’s eschatological judgment is impartial, according to works. Thus mere possession of the law of Moses provides no security in the face of this judgment, because possession of the law does not define the limits of knowledge of, or obedience to, the divine moral will.

Many contemporary exegetes treat our passage, Rom 2:17-29, as an elaboration upon vv. 1-16. Paul, according to this view, explicitly names the imaginary interlocutor whom he has so far been addressing implicitly and then uses sharper, more polemically crafted statements in order to drive home points similar to those already introduced in the first part of the chapter. However, closer scrutiny shows that the second part of Romans 2 has its own quite distinct purpose and setting. The two passages do, of course, exhibit numerous parallels, as Simon Gathercole has shown. Despite these parallels, however, the two passages differ significantly with respect to their setting and function. In the former passage, Rom 2:1-16, Paul

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55 Stenschke 2010, 202-03.
56 Dunn 1988, 1.78-82.
60 Gathercole 2002.
addresses his interlocutor as ἄνθρωπος, highlighting his humanity. In the latter passage, Rom 2:17-29, however, he addresses his interlocutor as Ἰουδαίος, highlighting his Jewish identity. The former passage opens and closes with the theme of divine eschatological judgment using the keyword κρίνω; the latter passage contains no explicit references to divine judgment (just a single reference to human judgment!). In the former passage, Paul frequently uses words emphasising universality, such as ἄνθρωπος, πᾶς, and ἔκαστος. All of these words are absent from the latter passage. In the former passage, there is no indication of any social contact between Jews and Gentiles: Jews “hear” the law; Gentiles are simply described as not “having” the law. In the latter passage, however, those who “have” the law are described as teachers of others, which implies significant social contact between Jews and Gentiles. In the former passage, the unspecified Gentiles simply do the generalised “things of the law,” implying that they haven’t heard the specific law of Moses. The uncircumcised man in the latter passage, on the other hand, “keeps” the specific “precepts” of the law, implying that he has heard direct Jewish instruction in the law. This all implies that Paul has moved from a wider world-setting in verses 1-16, to a more specific and concrete setting in verses 17-29.

61 Rom 2:1, 3.
62 Rom 2:17.
63 Romans 2:1-16 begins with the human, ἄνθρωπος, who judges, κρίνω, and concludes with the day when God will judge, κρίνει, the secrets of humans, τῶν ἄνθρωπων.
64 Rom 2:1, 3, 9, 16.
65 Rom 2:1, 9, 16.
67 Apart from a negative reference in 2:29, where praise ἐξ ἄνθρωπων is denied significance.
68 Rom 2:14.
69 Rom 2:26.
2. The synagogue social context of Paul’s argument in Romans 2:17-29

In fact, the concrete setting of Rom 2:17-29 can be specified precisely. There are a number of strong indications that Paul wishes his Christian readers to envisage this passage in the context of the mainstream Jewish synagogue.\(^{70}\)

The first, and most obvious, indication is that Paul deliberately addresses his interlocutor, for the first and only time in his letter, as a Ἰουδαῖος. Paul opens his diatribe with the phrase οὐ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζειν. Some scholars have suggested that Paul is addressing here a Gentile who “wants to be called a Jew” or who “calls himself a Jew.”\(^{71}\) This suggestion assumes that the verb ἐπονομάζω is being used in the middle voice to refer to a personal act of self-designation which challenges the public consensus. However, this would not fit with the known usage of the word. This verb is frequently used in the LXX and Josephus to describe the act of giving a publically available name to an individual or place.\(^{72}\) Since such public names are conferred by others or come about through general consensus, the verb never appears in the middle voice.\(^{73}\) The passive voice is, however, used; and when it is used it means “publically known by the name of ...”.\(^{74}\) This suggests that the verb in Rom 2:17 should also be understood in the passive voice; and that we should paraphrase Paul’s opening statement: “If you are generally acknowledged as entitled to the name Jew...” Paul is emphasising the public nature of his interlocutor’s Jewishness, and hence the interlocutor’s membership of the mainstream Jewish community situated in the synagogue.

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\(^{70}\) In 2 Cor 11:24, Paul reports that five times he received thirty-nine lashes “by the Jews.” This implies that he repeatedly expressed vocal opposition to authorities in a synagogue context for at least some time after his conversion (Frey 2007, 304; Watson 2007, 80); cf. Josephus, A.J. 4.238. Paul is letting his Christian recipients “overhear” his synagogue debate; he may perhaps also be demonstrating his ability to conduct debates in the Roman synagogues during his forthcoming visit.

\(^{71}\) Campbell 2006, 108; Thorsteinsson 2003, 197-204.

\(^{72}\) The many instances include, e.g., Gen 21:31, 25:25; Jos. A.J. 7.21.

\(^{73}\) Pace Jewett 2007, 222. Jewett cites Thucydides Hist. 7.69, but there the verb is in the active voice, not the middle voice.

\(^{74}\) e.g. Jos. A.J. 2.1; Exod 15:23. See also the use of the passive in the Papyri to denote publically acknowledged names (Moulton and Milligan 1914-1924, 3.251).
2. The synagogue social context of Paul’s argument in Romans 2:17-29

Secondly, there is a strong emphasis on the law, νόμος, as the basic constitutive element for all the other activities in this passage. The word νόμος appears 10 times in the space of 13 verses and is a key element in Paul’s discussion. Even the “uncircumcised” person in vv. 26-27 is said to “observe,” φυλάσσω, the “regulations of the law,” τὰ δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου, and to “keep the law,” τὸν νόμον τέλοῦσα. As we have already stated, this indicates that the uncircumcised person has had an opportunity to learn particular requirements relating to the law of Moses.\(^75\) It is highly unlikely that Paul is referring to the use of the law in the Christian community, because Paul never speaks of the relationship between Christians and the law in these terms.\(^76\) On the other hand, this description conforms very closely to what we know of the diaspora synagogue. The synagogue was the social centre of the Jewish community, where membership of the community was thoroughly integrated with its key defining activity: reading of and instruction in the law.\(^77\)

Thirdly, the argument about the “reckoning,” λογίζομαι, of circumcision to this physically uncircumcised person also indicates that Paul’s argument is set in the synagogue. Jews in Paul’s day debated the issue of whether uncircumcised Gentile synagogue adherents should be welcomed or treated like Jews.\(^78\) This indicates that Paul is referring to a known Jewish debate. We should not, as some scholars do, see the “reckoning” of circumcision in this passage as an equivalent to God’s “reckoning” of righteousness in chapter 4, because in chapter 4 Paul explicitly denies that that circumcision has anything to do with God’s reckoning of righteousness.\(^79\) The phrase makes sense, however, if Paul is entering into a


\(^{76}\) Paul nowhere speaks of Christians relying on the law, boasting in the law, knowing God’s will through the law, being educated in the law, observing the law, keeping the law, or transgressing the law (Rosner 2010).

\(^{77}\) The second-temple synagogue was both a community centre, hosting a range of activities such as communal meals, forensic discipline, hospitality for travellers, the distribution of welfare, and education of children in basic literacy; and also a place of religious instruction in the Torah (Levine 1999, 124-59). Torah reading was usually accompanied by a didactic activity such as a sermon or word of exhortation or time of communal study (e.g. Josephus C. Ap. 2.175, A.J. 16.43; Philo Legat. 156; Acts 13:13-15) (Schiffman 1999, 46-48).

\(^{78}\) Watson 2007, 74-79. We shall discuss this debate in more detail below, pp. 202-207.

\(^{79}\) Rom 4:9-12. See Nygren 1952, 134.
mainstream Jewish debate about whether Jews should welcome law-keeping synagogue adherents as if they were Jews. The law-keeping Gentile is thus best understood as a synagogue adherent, who has been introduced into Paul’s argument as part of his polemic against his Jewish interlocutor.

Finally, Paul’s conclusion concerns the meaning of the terms “Jew” and “circumcision.” In the rest of Paul’s writings, these terms refer to ethnic Jewishness and physical circumcision. We should assume the same is true here also. Paul is making a point about the significance of ethnic Jewishness, not robbing Jewishness of its ethnic significance altogether.

3. Jewish identity according to Paul

Thus Romans 2:17-29 is a summary of Paul’s redefinition of Jewish identity. By presenting this argument, Paul wants to persuade his readers to reject the mainstream Jewish community’s view of Jewish identity and to see how Jewish identity finds its true significance in the Christian community, in light of his own teaching about Christ and the gospel.

In my dissertation, I examine in more detail the similarities and differences between Paul’s view of Jewish identity and that of his contemporaries. Here I will briefly summarise my findings.

Firstly, Jewish identity, for both Paul and his contemporaries, has an essentially hermeneutical dimension. A Jew is, fundamentally, a person who reads and knows God’s will as revealed in Israel’s Scriptures. Paul, however, has redefined this hermeneutical dimension of Jewish identity in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The mainstream Jewish community defines itself by its possession and knowledge of the law of Moses, which it views as a complete and largely sufficient revelation from God. Paul, however, believes that the law, along with the prophets, are open texts, fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul also believes that Jews have a real advantage over non-Jews. However, he redefines the nature of this advantage. For the mainstream Jewish community,

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80 I deal with Phil 3:3 and Col 2:11 elsewhere.
Israel's privilege consists in the fact that the law is a gift from God which enables Israel to be obedient to God's moral will and hence gives them a soteriological advantage. Paul affirms the reality and value of the epistemological privilege that comes from the possession of God's word in the law. Yet he also argues that because of human sin, the law does not lead to ethical conduct or therefore to salvation in any such straightforward manner. This, in fact, fits well with Paul's subsequent statements in Rom 3. Paul affirms that the possession of divine revelation is the key Jewish advantage, but denies that the law-revelation leads to salvation in any straightforward sense.

Jewish *vocation* is also a prominent theme in Rom 2:17-29 (e.g. vv. 19-20). The mainstream Jewish community sees it as their collective vocation to illuminate gentiles, especially synagogue adherents, by teaching them God's will from the law. Paul redefines the Jewish vocation in light of the gospel of Christ. By examining other passages from Romans, we can see that the collective vocation of Christian Jews according to Paul is not simply to teach God's moral will from the law, but to teach the Scriptures as a whole and to proclaim the eschatological fulfilment of the law and the prophets in the gospel, so that the Gentiles come to praise God alongside them (e.g. Rom 15:7-12).
Part C: The wider concern of my research

This fact that Paul’s redefinition of Jewish identity includes a strong vocational element is directly relevant to the wider concern of my thesis. Very often, when Paul explicitly mentions Jewish identity, he is talking about his own vocation as apostle to the Gentiles or issuing warnings about potential rivals or opponents to his apostolic vocation. Not only does this suggest that Paul himself saw a strong connection between Jewish identity and apostolic vocation; it also suggests that other Jewish teachers and their Gentile hearers also connected Jewish identity with a preaching ministry to Gentiles. In fact, my dissertation aims to show how many of Paul’s discussions are generated directly by conflicts over the legitimacy of various conceptions of Jewish vocation and its outworking in ministry among Gentiles.


82 Rom 1:15-16, chs. 9-11, 15:7-33; 1 Cor 9:20-23; 2 Cor 3:7-16, 11:22-24; Gal 1:13-14, 4:21-31 (cf. vv. 17-19), 6:12-16; Phil 3:2-6; 1 Thess 2:14-16 and cf. Eph 2:11-3:8; Col 4:11. Tit 1:10-14 also mentions a Jewish form of teaching which is opposed to Paul’s preaching vocation (1:3).

83 E.g. 2 Cor 11:22-23; Gal 6:11-16; Phil 3:2-7 (see ch. 1) and esp. Rom 2:17-29 (see ch. 3).
Bibliography


Bibliography


