

Paul – Why Bother?

A Jewish Perspective

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My research interest in Paul began at university in 1977. My major was Judaic studies, and our class was reading Jewish eschatological texts, which were often quite critical of fellow Jews.¹ We discussed how this discourse represented in-house polemic, that it was based upon appeals to values to which the criticized were expected to subscribe, and that those who preserved them internalized these warnings for themselves. I wondered if Paul's rhetoric in Romans 11 should be read similarly, rather than as if representing the disparaging voice of an outsider. So I made that investigation of Paul's language in Romans 11:25–26 the topic of a class research project, which was entitled “‘All Israel Will Be Saved’: Paul's Apostolic Ministry and the Restoration of Israel”. Not without relevance for this essay, the few books I found on the shelves that offered encouragement for that hypothesis were written by Scandinavian scholars, especially the English translation of *Christ and Israel*, by the Danish professor Johannes Munck (1904–1965).² A special

This essay is a revised version of the lecture given by the author on the occasion of him being awarded an honorary doctorate by the Faculty of Theology at Lund University in May 2019.

1. “Israelites”, in the case of biblical texts; Paul used both terms to refer to the same people. Although the denotations can communicate salient differences in certain contexts, as Paul used them, and as I will do herein, they do not cancel each other out any more than does choosing to refer to being an American or a US citizen, *mutatis mutandis*.

2. Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, Philadelphia, PA 1967. I did not yet know the work of Krister Stendahl (1921–2008), although looking back, I

connection with Scandinavian scholarship, and scholars, has been a vital part of my story to this day.³

Reflecting on the role that initial curiosity has had on my now lifelong pursuit to understand Paul, and communicate what I have discovered, brings to mind another of the several identifiable influences that shaped my view of the world, and my place within it. Seven years earlier, in 1970, I saw a short film directed by Charles and Ray Eames entitled *Powers of Ten*. I have often reflected on a lesson I drew from this film, not least when enjoying success, but also when suffering failure.

The film began with a view of a couple having a picnic on a blanket at a park under a grand tree.⁴ The camera then moved away from them skywards, so that every ten seconds the view was ten times farther out. They quickly became no longer visible; one could see only the park, then only the larger area, the globe of the earth, and so on, until our own galaxy was visible only as a speck of light among many others. That view never fails to remind me of just how incredibly insignificant we are; even the biblical reference to dust might overstate the case.

The camera then reversed directions, returning to the original view of the picnicking couple. But it did not stop there; the camera began to move into the hand of one of them, repeating the magnification ten times every ten seconds. Eventually it showed the inside of a proton of a carbon atom within a DNA molecule in a white blood cell. The camera then reversed course once again to the original camera angle on the couple. The amazing complexity and importance of each one of us was palpable. Hillel's famous saying, altered to express the sense of purpose this inspires for me, is especially salient: "If not me, who? If not now, when?"⁵ Whether viewed through a microscope or from a distant satellite, there is much to be done, much to value. Who we are and what we do matter. We are so incredibly

suspect that he had influenced some works I did consult. When I actually met Stendahl years later, and asked who inspired his insights, he referred to Munck, and, although I had not noticed it at the time, I see now that he wrote the preface to the English version I had read. I was also influenced by the Norwegian scholar Jacob Jervell (1925–2014), and later, when I worked on my dissertation in the late 1990s, by another Norwegian, Nils Alstrup Dahl (1911–2001), whose research on irony in epistolography you will recognize in the title of Mark D. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context*, Minneapolis, MN 2002.

3. I want to express thanks to my colleagues at Lund University since the early 2000s, Magnus and Karin Zetterholm, Anders and Anna Runesson, and Dieter and Gun Mitternacht, and to Birger Olsson for introducing my work to the department already in the 1990s.

4. This image offers an opportunity to thank my lifetime picnic partner since that same year, my wife Vicky, for her encouragement throughout the many years of this storyline.

5. Common translation: "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?" *Pirkei Avot* 1.14.

insignificant. And yet, at the same time, maybe we can contribute some good that makes a useful difference in the future. No? – or dare I say, *Nu?*

In that light, I want to express awareness of the chutzpah involved in supposing that I see something that has remained unrecognized in the received views of Paul for two millennia. And yet I must pursue this hypothesis, all the more so as the years of research roll on, because it simply continues to show promise for interpreting text after text of Paul's, offering alternatives that not only make more probable historical sense, but that also challenge interpretive commonplaces that have proven to be harmful to Jews and others marginalized by the major Pauline traditions.⁶ I must bother with this; I am grateful to share this story in Lund with others I know are bothered by those traditions as well.

To return to my school storyline, a few years later, when I expressed an interest in pursuing graduate studies to investigate this thesis, the head of the Judaic studies department at my university, Dr. Joseph P. Schultz, a specialist in Christian-Jewish relations, was concerned that I understand how hard it would be to succeed in a career with an approach to the material that neither Christians nor Jews were likely to embrace. I realized that, since Judaism was understood negatively in Christian theological reasoning, as works-righteous and legalistic, one could not simply begin to discuss Paul in positive Jewish ways. It would not be received as reasonable to argue for reading Paul as a Jew who practiced and promoted Judaism when the prevailing paradigms discussed Paul as having left the practice of a Jewish way of life, disparaging Judaism as the negative, undesirable, and obsolete foil by which to define Christian difference and superiority. It appeared to me that I would have to become an expert in Second Temple and Talmudic studies as well as New Testament and Christian theology in order to challenge what appeared to be self-evident to the experts in the field of Pauline studies. The prospects of succeeding at all of that were more than a little overwhelming, from both the microscopic and telescopic vantage points.

Unfortunately, neither my professor nor I were aware that the work of Krister Stendahl or E.P. Sanders, published about that time, might make it to some degree possible to begin to discuss Paul in such intra-Jewish ways. What we were aware of was the new developments in rabbinic studies by Jacob Neusner (1932–2016), which offered a more historically viable way to analyze the texts for drawing comparisons to Paul's language, *mutatis mutandis*. At the time, the prospects of being accepted to or completing such a program of studies seemed unlikely, and, from the perspective of Dr.

6. Insightfully traced by the Uppsala scholar Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann*, Leiden 2009.

Schultz, ill-advised. Who would employ me? He suggested that I consider the path of the gentleman-scholar, doing as much research as I could while building my advertising agency, with the expectation that one day, if successful, I could devote full time to the pursuit of my thesis. In theory, I then would be able to express views that might be considered too controversial for someone seeking a tenure track career.

I took that route, although doubtful I would ever be able to pursue the scholar side; for many years it did seem merely a chimera, but one I nevertheless nurtured. When I had time to read and reflect, I could not shake the conviction that the reading of Paul I had imagined as historically probable might have great ideological promise, not least for how it could challenge the negative role his (anachronistic, as I saw it) voice continued to play in Christian-Jewish relations in contrast to the positive role scholars had begun to consider possible by way of reevaluating the historical Jesus' voice.⁷ Why not reconsider Paul's voice similarly?

Naturally, one of the focuses of my Judaic studies programme had been the study of the Holocaust. One could hardly escape noticing the role that *adversus Judaeos* theology played in shaping the culture in which those events took place, and how the traditional interpretation of Paul's voice contributed to that legacy. The more I read the secondary literature, the more I surmised that this contribution might be welcomed by Christians of good will who wanted to avoid perpetuating that harmful legacy, and by Jews involved in joint pursuits to help them do so. They appeared to be limited by the assumption that the received (construction of) Paul's voice was historically accurate, that he represented more of an impediment to forging mutual respect, that his arguments had to be muted rather than mined, except to highlight the seemingly ineluctable differences between Judaism and the Christianity he supposedly sought to create. I could not stop wondering, with the kind of agitation that can be motivating: Why does that construction of Paul continue to flourish as if self-evidently correct, when it is so riddled with historically questionable premises and socially harmful consequences?

I am grateful to report that the study of Paul in his context, as well as what we might draw from that for discussing our own, has begun to change. A small but growing number of scholars recognize the historical viability

7. This contrast is traced in Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*, Chicago 1998; Daniel R. Langton, "The Myth of the 'Traditional View of Paul' and the Role of the Apostle in Modern Jewish-Christian Polemics", *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 28:1 (2005), 69–104. Langton (pp. 99–103) notes that my reading represents a new development in Jewish approaches to Paul that he traces, and that, if it should prove convincing, could contribute positively to Christian-Jewish relations.

of reading “Paul within Judaism”, and we have begun to investigate and communicate this perspective, perspectives really, under that descriptive moniker.⁸ Not without relevance, many of the scholars at the forefront of this movement are Scandinavians.

Mention of Scandinavians brings me back to the timeline of my story. In the late 1980s I became aware of the work of Krister Stendahl and E.P. Sanders, which became known as the New Perspective on Paul. Their work challenged some of the ways that Judaism was conceptualized, but it had not changed fundamentally the way that Pauline scholars constructed their interpretations of Paul’s views largely in opposition to Jews and Judaism, *mutatis mutandis*, and could clearly be used to support very traditional binaries. For example, I also read Francis Watson at the same time, and he employed this new perspective to argue that Paul intentionally sought to separate his “churches” from the “synagogues”.⁹

As I studied these new approaches to Paul’s texts, I could not shake the idea that they were unnecessarily perpetuating the traditional construction of Paul in binary conflict with Jewish identity and behaviour; their Paul still left Judaism as if that was essential to achieve the ideals to which Paul’s message aspired, even if some of the reasons he supposedly did so had changed. While reading David Novak’s *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* – which perpetuated the classical Paul against Judaism legacy as an obstacle to advancing better relations – I could not shake the sense of urgency to undertake a more rigorous investigation.¹⁰ It was time to discover if the alternative reading of Paul that I had entertained, by this point for a long time, offered a

8. We work together as a formal section of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) called “Paul within Judaism”, and have published an edited volume: Mark D. Nanos & Magnus Zetterholm (eds.), *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, Minneapolis, MN 2015. To track my essays, see also Mark D. Nanos, *Reading Paul within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos*, vol. 1, Eugene, OR 2017. The informed will know that Magnus is Swedish, as is also his wife Karin, who contributed an essay to the volume and is currently a co-chair of the SBL section as well as both being professors at Lund University. Also Anders Runesson, another Swede, Lund University PhD graduate, and friend, served on the initial steering committee and contributed to the volume. The interesting role of Scandinavian scholarship and reception is evident in a recent essay about why the Paul within Judaism perspective makes a case for studying Paul in Jewish departments: Stefan Larsson, “Just an Ordinary Jew”, *Nordisk Judaistik/Scandinavian Jewish Studies* 29:2 (2018), 2–16. Our work is also widely referred to as the “Radical New Perspective on Paul”. I coined the alternative “Paul within Judaism” to avoid being constrained by the way that the New Perspective on Paul operates within the framework of the traditional theologically driven paradigms; these and related topics are discussed in Mark D. Nanos, “Introduction”, in Mark D. Nanos & Magnus Zetterholm (eds.), *Paul Within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, Minneapolis, MN 2015, 1–29.

9. Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach*, Cambridge 1989.

10. David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*, New York 1989.

historically probable construction of the apostle's life and message. And if it did: could this construction of Paul bear the positive ideological fruit I imagined possible? Might it help Christians think about, talk about, and behave towards Jews and Judaism more respectfully by way of appeals to Paul's own voice? Even if it could: Was that a task for a Jew? How would that be received? I had questions, not answers.

One sleepless night in 1992 I went to my old school files to find that Romans II paper. Although I was less than satisfied with many features of it – and, as I will relate, have only recently come to recognize the problematic acceptance of soteriological premises from which it proceeded – the argument I had made still seemed worth investigating further. The development of the New Perspective on Paul, wherein Judaism was being discussed in positive terms like being based on grace – valuations grounded in Christian ideological biases, to be sure – now offered some positive comparisons and new exegetical insights. Yes, the Paul of the New Perspective still left Judaism, and still found something fundamentally wrong with Jewish identity and behavioural norms, now essentialized as exclusivistic boundary marking behaviour instead of works-righteousness. Nevertheless, their reconsideration of the character of Judaism left their approaches to Paul vulnerable to reconsideration in the direction I had hypothesized. There seemed to be a basis for investigating the thesis that Paul argued from “within Judaism”, what I thought of provocatively, in terms of the discourse at the time, as a move from “Paul *and* Judaism”, which signalled “Paul, *from* but not *of* and *in competition with* Judaism”, to “Paul's Judaism”.

I decided it was time to research the hypothesis.

The early phases were a jumble of exciting discoveries and discouraging realizations. The more I read Romans as well as the secondary literature, the more I realized how large was the task. To argue for a first century contextual reading of Romans II required a working interpretation of the entire letter. The only scholar I had met informed me that I needed to pursue this in a PhD programme; otherwise I would not be able to do this kind of work properly, and no one would take me seriously either. I learned about the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and attended and spoke to scholars; some were encouraging, some were not. The task seemed daunting, but somehow possible; the fact that it needed to be done, and done now, was palpable. As far as I could determine, some scholars were on compatible tracks, but none on the same one.

I continued to research and write the essay, which became unwieldy enough to break into chapters as I realized it would take a book to lay out

the various pieces of the puzzle, which became my first monograph, *The Mystery of Romans*.¹¹

I sent the mostly finished manuscript to Fortress Press, a leading publisher of academic studies of Paul, in early 1994. I asked Marshall Johnson, the Director of Publishing, to please let me know immediately if there was not any chance they would publish an amateur such as myself, and, if he saw any merit in the work, where he thought I might find an interested publisher. Johnson kindly, and very quickly, replied that he was interested, that he found my approach attractive and would send the manuscript for peer review.¹² I was elated. A few weeks later he wrote to inform me that on the strength of the blind peer reviews by Alan Segal (1945–2011) and Krister Stendahl, Fortress would like to publish my book.

I cannot describe the sense of purpose and accomplishment I felt. Johnson told me about Krister Stendahl's enthusiasm for an approach he approvingly called "new", and one in which he saw a trajectory of his own work. Among the explanations offered for why Fortress "should publish this wild book" was that it represented a "*tour de force*". I was honored to meet Stendahl and to visit with him at subsequent SBLs, and with him and his wife Brita when business brought me to Boston. He continually inspired; his encouragement is one of my greatest honours. Segal, who was also Jewish, and, by the way, also deeply influenced by Stendahl and a student of Dahl, became a friend; he too offered encouragement, and he generously introduced me to his colleagues when I began to attend SBL meetings. I am proud that they are part of my story; their memories are for me, like for many of the scholars at Lund University, a special blessing.

The Mystery of Romans was published in early 1996 and won The National Jewish Book Award for Jewish-Christian Relations. Fortress, a Lutheran publisher, was quite surprised and proud to win this award, and Marshall Johnson went to New York to receive this honour with me and my family. The monograph received many positive journal reviews, was the subject of several scholarly society review panels, and remains in print to this day. Its reception has exceeded my wildest expectations. And yet, as I continue to study the material and learn from others, especially to investigate anew everything that seems self-evident, I notice weaknesses in my original reading. This too is an important element in my story.

11. Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter*, Minneapolis, MN 1996.

12. Johnson told me later, when we met, that he had been a student of William David Davies (1911–2001), from whose *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, London 1948, I also had learned much, and found encouragement.

The quest to undertake a historical reading of Paul requires the need to keep learning, to discover new aspects of his texts and recognize problems in one's own ability to read apart from what one expects to find. Oh, the continued value of that panoramic view from a distance.

During the mid-1990s I had several opportunities to teach classes on Paul and related topics in university and seminary settings, and I began to work on Galatians, which seemed, according to the received views, like the most natural challenge to my reading of Paul in Romans. It was becoming clear that the time had arrived to move on to the next stage of life. In 1997, I sold my company to another advertising agency and began a dissertation on Galatians at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

After completing the degree in 2000 and publishing the revised dissertation as *The Irony of Galatians*,¹³ I began to teach regularly at local universities (University of Kansas and Rockhurst University), and continued to work on the texts in Galatians that were not the focus of my dissertation, as well as specific flashpoint texts for the received view that Paul had left Judaism, such as 1 Corinthians 8–10 and Philippians 3. I also worked on Romans, with which the next phase of my story begins.

Re-visiting Paul's Message in Romans 11

In 2008 I was invited to offer a paper on Romans 11:11–36 at a conference in Germany on Romans 9–11 that brought together exegetes and theologians.¹⁴ This venue offered me an opportunity to revisit the translation and interpretive decisions I had made or accepted in the received views when writing *The Mystery of Romans*. And this led me to the startling discovery about Paul's view of the state of his fellow Jews that I want to relate to you, not least because I believe it will resonate with the sensibilities in Scandinavian scholars, who have been such a lifeline in my journey.

For my paper, I focused on the olive tree allegory. I wanted to understand why Paul developed it the way he did, since the imagery seemed to stand in contradiction to a central point he had made in the metaphors preceding the allegory. There he insisted that those who had tripped along the way had not fallen, and in the arguments that followed the olive tree allegory he also seemed to be talking about the fate of his fellow Jews in more

13. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians*.

14. My contribution to the conference volume is Mark D. Nanos, "Broken Branches: A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11–36)", in Florian Wilk & J. Ross Wagner (eds.), *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, Tübingen 2010, 339–376. It is also available with slight updating in Mark D. Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism: The Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos*, vol. 2, Eugene, OR 2018, 112–152, which is the version to which I will refer in any further references to that essay, and the other essays that are collected therein.

continuous ways than the notion that the branches had been broken or cut off signalled. Those two images offered starkly contradictory perspectives. Why did Paul staunchly deny they had fallen only to turn around and portray them as broken off? It could not be both; I supposed that he messed up his metaphors in one direction or the other.

I thought my task was to figure out and argue for one or the other metaphor as the more likely indicator of his primary view about the status of his fellow Jews. Admittedly, I was predisposed toward the stumbling but not fallen metaphor, and troubled by why he would follow that with broken off but able to be reattached, which I signalled in the title of my paper.

Although recognizing that Paul's goal in chapter 11 was clearly to challenge any emerging arrogance among the non-Jew target addressees, I had nevertheless always accepted the following discordant received translations for Paul's descriptions of his fellow Jews: for example, that "they were branches broken off"; that "you were grafted in their place"; that they were "hardened", "enemies", "disobedient", but that they could be "grafted back in", and in the future "all Israel will be saved". Paul's argument seemed to me to assume that they remained members of Israel, yet all of these translations work from the premise that these Jews were presently out of covenantal standing – although they could, even will, regain it. Seen from a distance, these characterizations clashed against the tone of Paul's otherwise deeply respectful message about these Jews suffering a much more temporary, anomalous situation, but as Israel. Were these translations required by the text? I decided to take a closer look.

I began to investigate the Greek lexicons regarding the normal usage of each of these words and phrases, and to read the ancient discussions of olive culture by Theophrastus (371–287 BCE) as well as Columella (4–70 CE, although Latin). It became readily apparent that there was good reason to consider whether, by selecting ἐκκλάω, Paul meant that the branches were "broken" as in "bent" rather than "broken off". Paul referred only to one wild branch being grafted in, which raised the question why that would require the allegory to portray the breaking off of any branches – much less many or, as most interpretations proceed, most of the natural ones. Moreover, the Greek requires the grafting to be among them (ἐν αὐτοῖς [masc. pl.]); that is, among the broken branches, but that makes no sense if they are broken off and thus not only dead but no longer on the tree! I also discovered that grafting into the part of a branch that remains after being pruned off (i.e., "in their place"), which is expressed in the received view, does not reflect the way olive tree husbandry works.¹⁵ Rather, a slit is

15. The image Jean Calvin (1509–1564) used for the flyleaf of his commentaries is telling. See

made into the bough, into which a branch is inserted. It would make sense, however, for some branches to be bent aside to make room for a wild branch to be grafted among them. In the early part of the allegory, when discussing the bent branches, Paul only uses the verb ἐκκλάω, which just so happens to include the translation option “to break” as in “to bend”. But when the allegory turns to threatening the foreign wild shoot with what it can expect if it should grow arrogant towards those branches temporarily bent aside to make a place for itself, then Paul introduces the verb ἐκκόπτω, which does indicate being “broken/cut off”, signalling a much more severe fate. One will hardly notice this development from the current translations; I had not.

When read this way, we can see that Paul was explaining why some Jews had not yet joined him to proclaim the message to the nations, which, he argued throughout the letter, was Israel’s special role, that over which some of Israel (even if many) were stumbling (Rom. 3:2; 9:6; 10:4, 15).¹⁶ This development represented a temporary anomaly that would soon be resolved, and that somehow had resulted in the best interests of the non-Jews anyway. In terms of branches, some among Israel were broken as in bent back, but not as if cut off of the tree, which fit the stumbling but not fallen metaphor that preceded.

In spite of the common refrain that “gentiles are grafted into Israel”, Paul does not identify the tree as Israel; the more probable image he sought to communicate was that these natural branches represented Israelites who remained in relationship to God, children of Abrahamic promise as the root and trunk, but that promise now includes a wild shoot among the natural branches to represent the inclusion of non-Israelites among Israelites. Anyway, people are not grafted into trees, or into a people either; the point is that if God can bless those who are not genealogical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, then God can certainly be working to bless the genealogical descendants in unexpected ways; therefore, do not gloat about your precarious inclusion as those also promised to Abraham from the nations. Doing so would demonstrate that you do not understand what God is doing or your role, and the consequences may be quite severe should you act accordingly.

There is not time to go into all of the many interesting details, and this essay and those that followed from it are now gathered together with others on Romans in volume two of my collected essays.¹⁷ But it is important to track a few of the other key elements that demonstrate how current

my discussion and the image in Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism*, 126–140, 187–190.

16. I was influenced in this direction by the work of Lloyd Gaston, *Paul and the Torah*, Vancouver 1987, 116–150, although I developed this insight differently than he did.

17. Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism*.

translations both fail to reflect normal Greek usage as well as the metaphorical dynamics, and, moreover, obscure more generous ways to construe Paul's view of the Jews under discussion.

For example, in Paul's argument in Rom. 11:25, just after the olive tree allegory, he uses the word *πώρωσις*, which is commonly translated "hardened". He did not choose *σκληρῶς*, which he used when referring to Pharaoh's heart to communicate obstinacy (Rom. 9:17–18). The more likely translation of *πώρωσις* is "callused".¹⁸ That Paul chose a different word to describe his fellow Jews is not evident in current translations, or distinguished in the interpretive discussions of Rom. 11:25, where one regularly encounters the interpreter's judgement that Jews were guilty of the same hardness of heart as Pharaoh. However, *πώρωσις* is rarely used outside of medical discussions for how the body or plant protects an injured limb or branch by forming a callus. Moreover, that translation plays metaphorically off the allegorical imagery that immediately preceded this statement, which features the interconnected best interests of the parts and the whole, the message that runs throughout the argument. When combined with a reading of the adverbial phrase *ἀπὸ μέρους* as "for a while/temporarily" – which is how it is normally translated in Rom. 15:24, rather than the adjectival translation usually supplied here, "a part of Israel" or "Israel partially" – we arrive at a more promising translation: "for a while a callus has formed for [the protection of the injured branches of] Israel". Did Paul maintain that his fellow Jews should believe that Jesus is the Messiah and confess him to the nations? Yes. But Paul did not regard the present failure of those who did not (yet) do so to represent rejecting Jesus or faithfulness to God. He knew from his own experience – which required a divine revelation – that they were not refusing that of which they have been actually persuaded. In the meantime, they – as when some limbs suffering damage threatens the health of all the other limbs too – and thus all Israel, needed God's protection.

On this reading Paul still passed judgement on Jews who did not agree with him, but it was prescriptive for the Christ-following non-Jews he targeted in order to elicit compassion towards these Jews, not condemnation. Such a portrayal was in keeping with the way the prophets wrote about those Jews with whom they found fault: from within the family, with hope that those they criticized will change and take up the options available for reconciliation with those who walk in the ways that the prophets uphold.

18. My research on this matter was originally published in Mark D. Nanos, "'Callused', Not 'Hardened': Paul's Revelation of Temporary Protection Until All Israel Can Be Healed", in Kathy Ehrensperger & J. Brian Tucker (eds.), *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation*, London 2010, 52–73. A slightly edited version is included in Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism*, 153–178.

Similar translation decisions should be considered throughout the chapter. One that stands out as too obvious to belabor is the Revised Standard Version's and the New Revised Standard Version's decision to introduce the egregious "of God" in Rom. 11:28 – so that the reader supposes that Paul argued that they were "enemies [ἐχθροὶ] of God", although "of God" appears in no manuscripts. But note also that Paul contrasts the word ἐχθροὶ with their status as also ἀγαπητοὶ ("beloved [ones] for the sake of the fathers"). Why not render ἐχθροὶ to mirror Paul's contrastive point, that is, adjectivally, which would communicate that they are temporarily "estranged [ones] for your sake". That translation plays off the metaphorical characteristics Paul has used to describe these Jews and their present relationship to the non-Jews Paul is addressing in more positive ways than they are tempted to suppose, and in the promising direction of the conclusion of the sentence: "for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29).

Note also that the translations available today choose "disobedient" and cognates for Paul's use of ἀπειθέω and cognates in Rom. 11:30–32. This translation decision reflects the reasoning that Paul thought his fellow Jews had willingly rejected the gospel, as if the claims made in the gospel constituted self-evident truths that these Jews knew or believed to be true but refused to accept in their disobedience to the gospel. This is reasoning one will find regularly articulated in many contemporary interpreter's discussions of this passage, and these chapters – and beyond that, when discussing the supposed reasons that Jews do not "believe in Jesus". But the premises from which such judgements proceed, and the translations that reflect them, fail to consider the fact that most Jews have not refused to obey or rejected something that they believe to be true; rather, it would be more accurate, and more generous as well, to recognize that they have merely been unpersuaded (such as had been Paul before receipt of a personal revelation that most Jews have never had). And just here is the poignant point: The most natural translation for ἀπειθέω is "unpersuaded".¹⁹

Paul is not here, or elsewhere in this chapter, describing disobedience or rejection of that which is known to be true, but that some Jews were presently not persuaded of that which Paul and his target readers were. Paul

19. When I delivered this as a lecture in May 2019, I was drawing from my own research to warrant the translation proposed. See Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism*, 109, 136, 159, 161, 186, 220, 266–267, 288–289, 291–292; Mark D. Nanos, "Romans", in Amy-Jill Levine & Mac Zvi Brettler (eds.), *Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford 2011, 278; 2nd ed., 2017, 312. However, since then a detailed investigation of this lexeme throughout the New Testament has been published, and, although without signalling awareness of my arguments, it confirms my translation and interpretation for Rom. 11:30–32: Matthew D. Jensen, "Some Unpersuasive Glosses: The Meaning of ἀπειθεια, ἀπειθέω, and ἀπειθής in the New Testament", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2019), 391–412.

is signalling that these Jews were presently doubting the claim of the gospel to warrant the inclusion of these non-Jews apart from them completing the rites by which they also could be counted among Israel according to prevailing (and quite inclusivistic proselyte rites of passage) norms: “now they doubt [ἠπειθήσαν] your [receipt of] mercy”. Paul balances that temporary development with the same, although earlier example of unpersuadability among the non-Jew addressees: “just as you formerly doubted [ἠπειθήσατε] God [i.e., when idolaters], but now received mercy [despite] this doubt [ἀπειθεία]”).

Yes, by making the case that everyone had to be joined together in doubt in order for God to shine as merciful, Paul’s argument depends upon a zero sum premise, with which one could (and I do) take issue – but he does so with the generous aim of creating interdependent concern for the other as no better or worse than oneself.

I do not mean to be disrespectful to any Christians, Jews, or Muslims, but by way of analogy: would most Christians, or Jews, be accurately described as rejecting Islam or Muhammad as “the Prophet”? Does not that judgement require that they have been convinced that the claims made were true? Are they being too stubborn to submit to “the truth” as if self-evident? Are they rejecting God’s grace? Or are they not persuaded of someone else’s claims for God, perhaps even not very aware of, or simply indifferent to those claims, more than likely convinced that what they do uphold as truth does not lead them to give this much thought? The distance from “Not persuaded (yet)” to “No!” is much greater than has been granted in the received views of Paul. Paul’s language does not require it.

The more natural translation alternatives for these Greek words or phrases present a message that better communicates Paul’s more likely benevolent goals here, for he sought to alter the viewpoint of these non-Jews toward generosity. His aim was not to communicate that these Jews have lost their place in this family, even if they have momentarily lost their way in terms of the gospel claims for these non-Jews, for which he regarded them to be in a state of discipline: estranged for your sake.

Paul labors hard to relate that these Jews have not been and should not be expected to be cast out of the family. Such benevolent commitments towards kin, whether towards one’s wayward siblings, anguished parents responding to dangerous interest or behaviour of their kids, or children towards problematic parents, are to be expected in normal familial relations. After all, Paul’s goal here – somehow still recognized by most readers against the grain of many choices in the traditional translations – was to persuade these Christ-following non-Jews to think and behave in generous

ways towards these Jews, as well as live uprightly, not least so that the Jews being discussed will be persuaded to reconsider the gospel claims and join Paul in taking up what he considered to be Israel's special task. That is the message of Rom. 12:1 and following, which begin from "Therefore".²⁰

Although my interpretations for these and some other elements were altered for subsequent papers and essays developed over the next couple of years, and although my overall reading no longer supported the implicit premise that Paul thought his fellow Israelites had lost their covenant standing during this temporary development (but rather in a sense become temporarily estranged from completing alongside of Paul their destiny as Israelites to bring the awaited news of reconciliation to the Creator God to the nations), I still did not recognize there was an alternative to the idea that the highlight of Paul's point was the "saving" of "all Israel", even though I had all along understood that in the sense of "restored", a sensibility the subtitle of my school paper shows already in 1977. I was still stumbling along, you might say, without seeing that everything else I was now arguing was subverted by the premises that his fellow Jews were "lost", as required by a translation celebrating that they "will be saved", or even, "will be restored".

That changed in 2015.

"All Israel Will Be Saved"?

The Paul within Judaism section developed a session for the 2018 SBL Annual Meeting around the question: "For Paul, Do Jews Have to Become Christians to be Saved?" I offered a paper entitled "Are Jews Outside of the Covenants if Not Confessing Jesus as Messiah? Questioning the Questions, the Options for the Answers too", which marshalled many of the insights from *The Mystery of Romans*, as well as those I have just been relating, especially in Romans 11.

Everything I had been re-reading, which I have been sharing with you, pointed to the conclusion that Paul did not believe that these fellow Jews had been cut off from covenant standing as members of Israel, and that the present scenario was both temporary and an anomalous development in all Israel's path towards the promised blessings, including the privilege of being the light to the nations, a blessing that Paul believed that he and some (remnant) Jews were already enjoying. If so, then the majority view proceeded from the mistaken assumption that Israel had said "No" even if "all", or at least many would one day say "Yes". This scenario, as usually described, will take place when Jesus returns so that his role as Messiah of Israel is self-evident in the way that, ironically, the presumption of a previous "No" should

20. Examined at length in Nanos, *Mystery of Romans*.

have made clear was a problematic premise, because it reasons that in the future, when presented with compelling evidence, these same Jews will welcome the news.

The minority *Sonderweg* or Two-covenant views proceed from a similar premise that, for Paul, Israel had said “No”, and that Paul’s argument turned around Christian evangelical concepts of “salvation”, but differ by arguing that Jews were “saved” by Torah, or by being Jews, members of Israel, and did not need to believe in Jesus: he was for non-Jews. I find both solutions problematic for different reasons, but in some ways the problems arise from shared assumptions. During the research for the 2015 paper I finally discovered something I had intuited without being able to properly identify or describe.

I awakened suddenly one night to the realization that I had not practiced a discipline that I knew was necessary at the beginning of every research project: namely, to look up the Greek words rather than rely upon the gloss we all learn in classes and textbooks and read in translations. Startled by this misstep, I began to investigate the lexicons. What I discovered was that the root verb σῶζω, when translated “will be saved”, and interpreted to signify evangelical salvation in Paul’s description of the status of “all Israel” in Rom. 11:26, deviated from the normal usage. The normal usage is “to keep safe” or “protect”: they were “safed”, you might say.²¹ A Greek of Paul’s time would use σῶζω to describe a doctor “saving” a patient, meaning that they were prevented from dying. That corresponds metaphorically to being “kept alive” on the tree rather than cut off and reattached, which was what my research on the allegory had indicated that Paul was seeking to communicate about the current status of his fellow Jews, in direct contrast to the received view.²² One could refer to all of this as “saved”, but apart from qualification, probably still with it, the traditional paradigm of evangelically

21. Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed., Oxford 1996, 1748, 1751; Johannes P. Louw & Eugene A. Nida (red.), *Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, Cape Town 1989, 241. For more details, see Mark D. Nanos, “‘All Israel Will Be Saved’ or ‘Kept Safe’? (Rom 11:26): Re-Visiting Paul’s Expectations for his Fellow Jews”, in Frantisek Abel (ed.), *Israel and Nations: Paul’s Gospel in the Context of Jewish Expectation*, Minneapolis, MN forthcoming. Since that discovery in 2015, I have included this observation in several papers and in the revised versions of some of the essays in Nanos, *Reading Romans within Judaism*, see especially pp. vii–xxxii. See also Nanos, “Romans”, 2017, 311–312, compared to Nanos, “Romans”, 2011, 278, where I added the glosses “rescued” and “healed” to “restored” for “saved”, which demonstrates how close I was coming in 2009, when writing that manuscript, based on other contextual elements, but before properly re-examining the lexeme itself. This discovery naturally has led to reconsidering the overall message in the light that it casts.

22. The gospels, for example, did not use σῶζω to describe Jesus “raising” someone such as Lazarus from the dead any more than others used this word or cognates to describe saving someone who or thing that had expired, been lost already, in need of resuscitation.

defined salvation – and its premise that Jews were otherwise “lost” – would be evoked thereby.²³ Better to use “kept safe”, “protected”, and for drawing on the familiar to sharpen the point, “safed”.

Throughout the chapter, Paul argued that God was protecting all Israel during this anomalous estrangement, which he described metaphorically as stumbling but not fallen, bent to make space for the shoot to be planted among them, able to be reinvigorated, callused to protect any cracked tissue so that the tree could be fruitful, including the branches suffering this temporary fate, estranged, unpersuaded or doubting, and so on. Discussion of from what, or maybe better, from whom this protection was needed is an interesting topic of its own, but one that must be left unexamined here.

Conclusion

I had come full circle. I realized Paul was arguing that he was certain – regardless of how things appeared, and in spite of the possible negative consequences for these non-Jews if they were not faithful to their calling alongside of these members of Israel, that “all Israel will be kept safe”. Although it does not seem that Paul successfully forecasted the way that events would unfold in his ministry with respect to most of his fellow Jews,²⁴ or that his warnings prevented the history of harm towards them that he sought to nip in the bud, there is good reason to understand Paul to be seeking to communicate that his fellow Jews remain the Israel to which “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” – those whom God will protect when no one else will (the message of the citations from Isaiah in Rom. 11:26–27).²⁵

I am excited about working through new implications from these insights, including what I can learn from the give and take with my peers, and hopeful that the results will provide additional ways to improve Christian-Jewish relations in the years to come. The challenge is not only for Christians to reconsider their constructions of Paul, but also for Jews and any others who enter into that research, or draw from it, to do so as well. The implications extend to how Christians of good will might be freed to approach other “others”, whether Christians or not, without the need to surrender the value of their texts, read according to responsible historical and thus cross-cultural methodologies.²⁶

23. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Minneapolis, MN 2006, 702, highlights the challenge, for he categorically expresses that there is “little doubt that the verb σωθήσεται (‘they shall be saved’) refers to evangelical conversion”.

24. I still subscribe to the basic trajectory as discussed in Nanos, *Mystery of Romans*, 239–288.

25. Discussed in detail in Nanos, “All Israel”.

26. Thus offering an exegetically based alternative today that was not available to Rosemary Radford Ruether when perspicaciously observing: “contemporary ecumenists who use Romans

The received Paul has played such an important part in the history of harmful othering. Nevertheless, I see great potential in the proposed Paul within Judaism. He was more like the other than has been realized for almost two millennia, having become known as the quintessential Christian convert from Judaism, rather than a representative of Jewish messianic claims for Jesus. Jesus was also a Jew who makes the most sense when understood, like Paul, within Judaism – but that is, of course, already a desideratum. I am optimistic, albeit as an outsider, that this way of reading Paul also holds promise for Christians apart from how it impacts the “other”, starting with the simple insight that Christian esteem should not and need not require a negative assessment of the other, or a foil of any kind, in order to celebrate what is upheld to be its own ideals.

I hope you will agree with me, Jew and Christian or neither, that there are good reasons to further investigate this way to read Paul together – dare I say even interrogate his texts and the received readings thereof, rather than accept them when we reach for what “Paul said”. For both historical and ideological reasons, re-reading Paul is worth all of our bother. ▲

SUMMARY

Most interpretations of Paul understand the apostle to argue that Jews who did not share his faith in Jesus Christ had lost their original covenant standing. Yet, at the same time, they maintain that there will come a time when Jews will believe (based on the same terms as Gentile sinners), and then “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:26). I began my investigation of Paul assuming that, although the prevailing view that the apostle left Judaism was mistaken, his interpreters were basically correct about his view of his fellow Jews as lost but certain to be saved. I no longer do. In this essay I trace some of the developments in my life-time journey, as a Jew, to read and then re-read the texts in Romans 11, wherein Paul sets out his view of his fellow Jews. I discovered alternatives for translating and interpreting these texts that did not privilege the traditional premises, which has led to profoundly altering some of my previous conclusions. I now propose that we read Paul to signal “kept safe” rather than “saved”, because that is simply how $\sigma\acute{\omega}\zeta\omega$ was used, and what, I now realize, everything else in his argument signals. I propose that this revision offers a more historically probable reading of Paul’s arguments. Moreover, I am convinced that his voice, thus understood, offers a more promising way forward for Christian-Jewish relations.

11 to argue that Paul does not believe that God has rejected the people of the Mosaic covenant speak out of good intentions, but inaccurate exegesis”. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, New York 1974, 106.