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THEY BECAME FOOLS:  
A PAULINE DESCRIPTION OF APOSTASY IN ISRAEL AND  
ITS PRESCRIPTIVE IMPLICATIONS FOR BOTH JEWS AND  
GENTILES IN ROMANS 1:18–25

JUSTIN SODERQUIST

Though “Paul was no systematic theologian,”<sup>1</sup> his letter to the Romans comprises his most carefully constructed extant work. This study will examine the small pericope (1:18–25) immediately following his thesis statement in 1:16–17: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, The one who is righteous will live by faith.”<sup>2</sup> While many are the topics which could be addressed in consideration of this brief portion of Pauline diatribe, the current examination will focus on just one—the identity of those to whom Paul is primarily referring in the passage. Following a careful examination of the available evidence including a survey of prevailing scholarship, the discussion will conclude with a look at the implications of Paul’s words for both Jew and Gentile alike.

### To Whom

Despite the inclusion of Paul’s typical salutation in the beginning of Romans, his ambiguous wording has led scholars to a “little dispute over the ‘to whom’ question.”<sup>3</sup> Though he specifically mentions the Gentiles in 1:5–6, he then says in verse 7, “πᾶσιν τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Ῥώμῃ ἀγαπητοῖς θεοῦ, κλητοῖς ἁγίοις,” possibly expanding the meaning to include Jewish Christians as well. Commenting on the issue, J. D. G. Dunn notes, “We do know . . . that there was a large Jewish community in Rome in the first century (estimated at between 40,000 and 50,000)” and also that “there was an active

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1. Stephen Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul: The “Lutheran” Paul and His Critics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004), 164.

2. All biblical quotations in English will be from the NRSV and all those in Greek will be from the UBS4 unless otherwise noted.

3. J. D. G. Dunn, “Romans, Letter to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 838.

Christian mission among ‘the circumcised’ (Gal 2:9).<sup>4</sup> This leaves the possibility open that Paul was not only addressing the Gentiles in Rome. That this is the case becomes quite obvious once he starts to single out the Jews in 2:17, but the preceding verses (especially 1:18–32) have proven to be more of a gray area. Many commentators have taken the position that immediately following what has come to be known as his thesis statement (1:16–17), Paul begins a rhetorical diatribe against the Gentiles in which he berates them for their idolatry, immorality, and suppression of the truth only to turn around and place similar blame on the Jews for these same sorts of deeds in the subsequent chapter.<sup>5</sup> Several of those who hold such a view maintain that these verses contain passing allusions to the Jews throughout, but the bulwark of the attack is aimed at the Gentiles. A closer examination will, perhaps, reveal that the opposite could actually be the case—that Paul is primarily arguing against the Jews with only occasional reference to the Gentiles.

### First the Jew, Then the Greek

It is important to note that Paul is clearly speaking to both Jews and Gentiles about both Jews and Gentiles, but the distinction to be made is that he is talking *primarily* about the Jews and only *secondarily* about the Gentiles. This follows the established motif set forth in 1:16: “to the Jew first and also to the Greek,” repeated throughout the epistle (see Rom 2:9–10; 3:29; 9:24; 10:12; etc.). This is especially apparent in 11:11–24 where Paul describes how the gospel will go to the Gentiles as a result of the Jews’ apostasy. The Jews are the natural branches of the olive tree and the Gentiles are the outsiders being gifted with the chance to become a part of Israel through the grafting process. The story of Romans is the story of Israel,<sup>6</sup> and it may only discuss the Gentiles

4. J. D. G. Dunn, “Romans,” 838

5. A considerable number of scholars uphold this view to one degree or another. Notable among them are A. Katherine Grieb, *The Story of Romans: A Narrative Defense of God’s Righteousness* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 25–6; C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), 27; J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988), 51; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans AB 33* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 270; and N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. L. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:413. Wright claims that “though the spearhead of this attack (1:18–2:16) corresponds to regular Jewish polemic against the pagan world, Paul sharpens it up with specifically Christian notes, and he hints that Israel itself is included in the general indictment. He turns in 2:17–29 specifically to his own people, the Jews.” The “regular Jewish polemic” he mentions is largely encapsulated in Wisdom 13–14, a source from which Paul seems to have drawn quite heavily in his formulation of this section of Romans. However, Paul does not point to the Gentiles as being most guilty of the listed offenses (as the attack in Wisdom does), but rather to the Jews themselves, his own former people.

6. To clarify terminology, I refer to Jews as those to whom the covenant was originally given. Gentiles, conversely, are those to whom it was not originally given. By “Israel” I refer more broadly to God’s covenant people as a whole who, in the end, will comprise both Jews and Gentiles depending on their acceptance or rejection of the covenant as attested by their faith in Christ (or lack thereof—again, see Rom 11:11–24). I realize that this distinction of

only insofar as they accept (or reject) the invitation to become members of covenant Israel and live in faith. Though Paul may not be talking primarily about them in this section, they need to pay very close attention because they are about to be invited into the same covenant relationship. The same conditions that applied to the Jews—both promised blessings and promised cursings—will now apply with equal efficacy to themselves. The implicit hope is that they will learn from the Jews' mistakes and not do likewise.

### Identifying the “Truth”

Let us now turn our attention back to the text at hand (Rom 1:18–25). Careful examination will show that those against whom God's wrath is revealed in 1:18 are primarily the Jews. They, then, are the antecedent for every instance of the words “they” or “them” (αὐτοί in its various forms) not only through verse 25 but continuing on to the end of the chapter and even further throughout the majority of Romans.

#### *“Natural” or “General” Revelation*

In 1:18, the phrase to which the various versions of αὐτοί refer throughout 1:19–32 is, “ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων.” The key to determining the identity of the people who are suppressing (κατεχόντων) the truth here is to first identify the “truth” itself being suppressed. This question has given rise to a lot of speculation including what has come to be known as “natural” or “general” revelation. The forms of this “revelation” are sundry and vast. Richard Alan Young gives a good overview of proposed theories by suggesting that they be classified into three overarching categories:

- (1) Some say that the Creator left behind clues or ‘tracks’ in creation from which all persons can logically reason to a thematic knowledge of God...
- (2) Some say that God personally reveals the divine presence through the medium of creation to all persons . . . [and] (3) Others say that all persons have a vague, unthematic awareness of God by virtue of recognizing that they are finite creatures living in a contingent world. The recognition of creaturely finitude awakens a faint, intuitive awareness that there is something beyond. It depends on neither ratiocination nor divine self-disclosure.<sup>7</sup>

Young concludes that Paul is asserting some sort of a universal knowledge or understanding, but it is in the form of the third category—the “unthematic awareness” or what he calls a “felt ignorance.”<sup>8</sup> He goes on to differentiate this

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terms, especially the definition of “Israel,” is a major presupposition with which some will disagree. Thus, for the sake of the argument and given the bounds and scope of this paper, I will simply assert it as a working assumption throughout.

7. Richard Alan Young, “The Knowledge of God in Romans 1:18–23: Exegetical and Theological Reflections,” in *JETS* 43 no. 4 (2000): 695.

8. Young, “Knowledge of God,” 705. See this reference and the corresponding discussion in Young for a better understanding of the premises that led to this conclusion. I found them, for the most part, unconvincing.

type of knowledge from what he calls the “true knowledge of God” which, according to his examination of Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman literature, “can only come through God’s personal self-disclosure.”<sup>9</sup>

The problem with the assertion that Paul is referring here to a mere “felt ignorance” can be seen by taking this variable and reinserting it back in to the original equation. In other words, does the theory adequately fit within the context of the text? In 1:19, it reads that the knowledge (γνωστόν)<sup>10</sup> of God is plain or manifest (φανερὸν) among them because God showed it to them (ἐφάνερωσεν). Rom 1:20 talks about aspects of this knowledge being understood (νοούμενα) or clearly seen (καθορᾶται). The terms employed here lexically contradict Young’s concept of a vague awareness or ignorance. In 1:21, Paul renders “God” as the direct object of the participle γνόντες. He does not say that they had some sort of overtly mystical and indefinable cognizance concerning God, but rather that they *knew* him.<sup>11</sup> The fact that they consciously failed to honor or give thanks to him (ἐδόξασαν ἢ ἠὲ χάριστησαν) suggests that they knew he was an actual being to whom honor and thanks were due. This is further evident from verses 23 and 25, where it says that “they exchanged the glory of . . . God” for “images” of man, “the truth about God for a lie.” The term “truth” in this context simply fails to correspond to Young’s notion of a “felt ignorance.” It seems, rather, to connote more of a special type of revelation or knowledge—one more conspicuously Jewish.

### Lexical and Grammatical Evidence

Further evidence for the view that Paul had primarily the Jews in mind in this section can be seen by looking closely into the lexical and grammatical nuances of the terms τοῖς ποιήμασιν in verse 20, γνωστόν in verse 19, and ὄργη in verse 18.

#### *Instrument or Agent?*

In 1:20, Paul says that the unseen<sup>12</sup> things of God (his “eternal power and

9. Young, “Knowledge of God,” 707.

10. More on the lexical intricacies of this hermeneutically slippery word will follow below.

11. The fact that the word meaning “to know” is employed here may also be seen as evidence for a closer relationship with and understanding of God as more than Young’s “felt ignorance.” The concept of “knowing” in the Bible often implies a more intimate relationship than we mean when using the word today. For example, in Genesis 4:1 it says, “Adam knew [γῆ in the MT or ἔγνω in the LXX] Eve his wife; and she conceived” (KJV). Often throughout the Bible, marital imagery is employed to describe the relationship between Jesus Christ (the bridegroom) and the church (the bride), connoting a much more intimate relationship than mere acquaintance or Young’s “unthematic awareness” upon which the theories of “natural” or “general” revelation seem to be based. Rather, the implied relationship is both stronger and more intimate, reinforced by the fact that it is based on covenants.

12. I translate ὄρατα as “unseen” rather than the popular “invisible” because the adjective does not necessarily imply ability (or inability, as the case may be) in this context. The semantic range of the verb can definitely include the concept of ability, but it is

divine nature”) are clearly seen “so that they are without excuse.” The participially subordinated phrase “τοῖς ποιήμασιν νοούμενα” modifying καθορᾶται offers at least four different lexical and grammatical possibilities. First, Paul could be talking about the created world itself (nature) as an instrumental dative. However, to assume this would be to interpret Paul as describing the idea of “natural” or “general” revelation mentioned above, which was shown to most likely *not* be the case. The second possibility is that Paul is still using an instrumental dative, but instead of referring to nature with ποιήμασιν, he is actually referring to the people God has created. This would not be the only time where Paul had used the word ποίημα to refer to a human being; He also does so in Ephesians 2:10, where he says, “αὐτοῦ γὰρ ἔσμεν ποιήμα” (we are his creation).<sup>13</sup> This would align well with the biblical passages asserting that Israel is to be a light to the Gentiles (see Isa 42:6; 49:6; 60:3 and their echoes in Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; and 26:23).<sup>14</sup> A third option assumes that, just like in the previous example, the word ποιήμασιν refers to the people God has created, but instead of employing an instrumental dative, Paul is actually using the dative of intermediate agent. Wallace lists what he considers to be the “four keys to [the] identification” of this rare dative: (1) “*Lexical*: the dative must be personal.” (2) “*Contextual*: The person specified by the dative noun is portrayed as exercising volition.” (3) “*Grammatical*: the only clear texts involve a perfect passive verb.” And (4) “*Linguistic*: a good *rule of thumb* for distinguishing between agent and means is simply this: the agent of a passive verb can become the subject of an active verb, while the means normally cannot.”<sup>15</sup> The usage of τοῖς ποιήμασιν as a dative of agency fulfills all of these requirements except for the fact that the participle (νοούμενα) is in the present tense, not perfect.<sup>16</sup> However, given that the perfect implies the present effect of a

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not warranted in many cases, thus context must dictate usage. It is, in fact, theoretically possible to “see” God’s δύναμις (power) and θεϊότης (divinity) as evidenced by the use of καθορᾶται, which emphasizes the fact that they really are seen—fully and/or clearly. Of course, this depends on how one interprets Paul’s nuance of the idea of seeing. This could just be a play on words on his part, but the evidence does not necessarily warrant it given the context, thus it is exegetically unsound to rule out “unseen” as plausible in this instance, and it is actually preferable given that it doesn’t unfoundedly imply ability.

13. This assumes, of course, Pauline authorship of Ephesians, which I accept.

14. Whether or not they actually were that light depends on one’s personal interpretation of the events. I assert that they were a light only to the extent that they did what God commanded them to do and that the opposite was also the case. This does not greatly reflect on them given their history of disobedience. However, I also hold that the story of Israel continues on in our day and that those prophecies and promises made of old that have not been fulfilled will yet find efficacy and completion.

15. Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 164. See also Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., “ποίημα,” n.p., in *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains on CD-ROM*, Version 8.0.1, 2008 (domain number 42.30).

16. As for volition, Wallace says in the “debatable” example of 1 Tim. 3:36 that “no volition is required in the act of seeing” by which he seems to also imply other verbs of sense perception such as the participle νοούμενα (165). However, this is not the case. Consider

past action and also that Paul seems to be emphasizing the “present-ness” of the participle *νοούμενα* in this instance, the example must surely not be dismissed as implausible even by Wallace’s own standards.<sup>17</sup> A fourth option could be that Paul again is using *τοῖς ποιήμασιν* as an instrumental dative as in the first two options above, only this time there is a difference in the object for which the substantive *ποιήμασιν* stands. He could be referring to the covenants God made with Israel instead of the things (nature) or the people he created. In other words, God makes his unseen power and divinity evident by means of the covenants he makes with his children. In the context of the passage—the Jews’ incurrance of God’s wrath as a result of their turning away from the covenant and the truth he offered them—perhaps this option would be most fitting.

*Known vs. Knowable*

Next we turn to Paul’s use of *γνωστός* in 1:19. According to Louw and Nida, there are six nuanced semantic ranges listed for this word in the New Testament.<sup>18</sup> One of them (domain number 28.21) refers simply to anything that is known. Four others deal more precisely with the notion that that which is known is actually *well* known, even to the point of connoting a friendly or even familial relationship with the knower (28.30, 28.32, 34.17, 58.55). The last one (28.57) involves the ability or potentiality of a thing to be known. This is the one commonly chosen in modern translations to represent the occurrence of *γνωστός* in Romans 1:19.<sup>19</sup> However, this is the only passage cited as evidence for such a usage which makes one wonder why it was singled out as such in this instance alone. A note in *The Oxford Study Bible*, commenting on the phrase translated “all that may be known” (connoting the idea of potentiality) says, “i.e. except God’s special revelation to Jews and Christians.”<sup>20</sup> It seems like the editor is going out of his way to justify what is clearly an obscure rendering by New Testament standards. Why change the meaning in this isolated instance? Why not let it share the semantic range of the other examples in the New Testament? Granted, the word can be found to indicate potentiality as can be seen in several instances of its classical usage,<sup>21</sup> but its immediate context and its overall sense in the New Testament seem to warrant otherwise. As for its usage in other *koine* Greek literature—namely Philo and the Septuagint—every single occurrence of *γνωστός* connotes the “well known” idea.<sup>22</sup> Based on the foregoing evidence, the occurrence of *γνωστός* in Romans

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for example the situation in Numbers the where Jews who were bitten by poisonous snakes were commanded to look to the serpent on the stick to live. If they did not show volition by doing so, they died (21.8–9).

17. Though Wallace does not include this passage in his clear nor even in his debatable examples for the dative of agency.

18. Louw and Nida, “*γνωστός*,” n.p.

19. See, for example, the NIV, NRSV, KJV, NKJV, NAB, CEV.

20. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, and James R. Jueller, eds., *The Oxford Study Bible: Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford, 1992), 1432.

21. Though not once in the New Testament, at least that I have found.

22. These occurrences often connote the notion of friendly or familial relation as

1:19 does not merit its own special category, but instead should retain the nuance of “well known” as is fitting in view of its biblical context.<sup>23</sup> Accepting such as the case, the verse could be rendered thus: “For what was well known of<sup>24</sup> God is manifest among them, for God revealed it to them.” The idea that γνωστός means “well known” rather than “knowable” rules out the option that Paul is talking about the Gentiles in this passage (the Gentiles at large, that is, not including those who may have converted to Christianity), among whom the widely manifest knowledge of God would indeed be a hard case to make.

### *Wrath and Covenants*

Another evidence that the Jews are the primary addressee Paul had in mind can be seen by the implications conveyed in the word ὀργή in 1:18.<sup>25</sup> In his commentary on Romans, Dunn writes, “In the OT [where the audience is clearly Israel] the wrath of God has special reference to the covenant relation.”<sup>26</sup> He then goes on to explain that he does not think that is the case in this instance because he sees it as a reference primarily to a more universal audience (the Gentiles). “However,” he says, “if the covenant is seen as God restoring Israel to man’s proper place . . . then Creatorly wrath can be seen as the full scope of the other side of the coin from covenant righteousness (cf. Isa 63:6–7; Sir 5:6; 16:11); and see also [Rom] 2:5.”<sup>27</sup> The immediate context of this passage—Paul rebuking the Jews—suggests that the concepts of wrath and covenants really are two sides of the same coin. G. L. Borchert asserts that “Yahweh’s wrath is . . . aimed at Israel for failing to live by the covenant which Yahweh established with the chosen nation (e.g., Ex 32:10; Num 11:1, 33;

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mentioned above. Rudolf Bultmann argues that there is, however, one instance of the word in the Septuagint that carries the nuance of potentiality: Sir 21:7 (Rudolf Bultmann, “γνωστός,” *TDNT* 1:718–719). However, this is debatable as evidenced by the translation “widely known” in the NRSV and “known from afar” in NETS.

23. Contra Cranfield (113) and others who maintain that the word should be rendered “knowable” following the tradition of key interpretational figures such as Origin, Thomas Aquinas, and others.

24. It is tempting to translate “τοῦ θεοῦ” as “from God” (seeing it as a genitive of origin), but the context is insufficient to support the idea with any degree of certainty.

25. I will not go into full detail about the specific timing implied by ὀργή, but rather focus primarily on the audience to whom Paul focuses primarily. But as for the matter of timing, a small note may suffice for our purposes. Paul seems to be indicating both the present situation (meaning both OT and NT times) as well as the eschatological outpouring. Brendan Byrne writes, “In early parts of the OT the destructive force of God’s wrath is directed against Israel (see, e.g., Exodus 32). The prophetic literature associated wrath with a coming judgment destined to fall upon either unfaithful Israel or oppressing foreign nations. In the symbolic world of Jewish apocalypticism ‘wrath’ in this sense became a key factor in the scenario of the anticipated eschatological judgment: the righteous could expect deliverance (salvation) from the wrath; its full force, however, would fall upon those who oppress them, whether foreigners of the unfaithful in Israel” (Brendan Byrne, *Romans* [Sacra Pagina 6; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996], 73). The extent to which Paul is talking about the present vs. the future is difficult to unpack with certainty.

26. Dunn, *Romans*, 108, 154.

27. Dunn, *Romans*, 108, 154.



Amos 2:6).<sup>28</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson argues that “Paul’s purpose here is less to show a universal condition of humanity than to describe *for the people of his own world* how the rejection of God leads to destruction and despair.”<sup>29</sup> In this sense, Romans is all about Israel which, in turn, is all about covenants.

Romans 1:18–25, it would seem, is directed toward the Gentiles only to the extent that they have entered into a relationship with the God of Israel and thus also become part of Paul’s “own world,” whether it be a covenant relationship or the type described in 2.14–15. Bruce E. Shields argues the contrary. He asserts that Paul’s conclusion, “and actually the main purpose for the argument...is simply and clearly stated by the closing infinitive clause of verse 20”—“εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτοὺς ἀναπολογίτους” (so that they are without excuse). This, he says, is “Paul’s assessment of the Gentiles.”<sup>30</sup> However, the Gentiles arguably have the most excuse since they were *not* the ones “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom 3:2). This emphasizes one of Paul’s major arguments throughout Romans—that the Jews are under greater condemnation precisely for the fact that they are the people to whom the law was given. They are under sin because “through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20). Paul further asserts that “sin is not reckoned when there is no law” (Rom 5:13). Indeed, how can there be sin without a law to indicate what is and is not acceptable to the lawgiver?<sup>31</sup> For a law to have effect it must be made known to those who are to be under its jurisdiction. Katherine Grieb states, “Action that is ‘righteous’ or done ‘in righteousness’ is action done ‘in right relationship’ with one’s covenant partner. It is ‘doing the right thing by’ someone.”<sup>32</sup> Thus the unrighteous men mentioned in 1:18, those against whom “the wrath of God is being revealed,” are they who have the law given to them and then sin against it—these are the Jews. It could be argued that the only substantial allusion to the (non-Christian) Gentiles in this entire passage comes later on in 2:1 where Paul says, “ὧ ἄνθρωπε πᾶς.” This is the point at which many commentators hold that Paul switches from talking about the Gentiles to the Jews more

28. G. L. Borchert, “Wrath, Destruction,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 991.

29. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 31 (emphasis added).f

30. Bruce E. Shields, “The Areopagus Sermon and Romans 1:18ff: A Study in Creation Theology,” in *Restoration Quarterly* 20 no. 1 (1977): 29–30.

31. Although the Mosaic Law was fulfilled in Christ, this does not mean that there was no more “law.” For example, Paul said, “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death” (Rom 8:2), suggesting that “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” continued after the Mosaic Law was fulfilled. Furthermore, after Paul concludes in chapter 11 that “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26), he continues on in the following chapters to give exhortation to the people according to what he considered to be the commandments of God, no differently than he did throughout the earlier portions of Romans as well as every other epistle of his that we have. Perhaps it could be said that faith does not replace commandments, but rather vivifies them insofar as the are obeyed with an eye single to God’s glory, the possibility of which is only made possible in and through the Atonement of Christ.

32. Grieb, *Story of Romans* 21.

specifically,<sup>33</sup> but read in the light of the previous discussion it would appear that the opposite may well be the case.

### Where Much is Given, Much is Required

The notion that the Jews were under greater condemnation because they were “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom 3:2) is reminiscent of the mini-parable of the faithful and unfaithful slaves in Luke, one of Paul’s former missionary companions (12:47–48). It reads, “That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.” Much was required from the Jews because they had been given much. As the Lord’s covenant people, they were supposed to be a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 42:6, 49:6; 60:3; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47, 26:23).<sup>34</sup> They were the ones who had the truth to suppress (1:18, 25), who knew God (1:21), and who had the “glory of the immortal God” to exchange (1:23). They are the ones who “[knew] God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve[d] to die” and yet “they not only [did] them but even applaud[ed] others who practice[d] them” (1:32).<sup>35</sup> It is important to point out here that “such things” in verse 32 refers not only to the homosexuality that Paul condemns in 1:24–27, but rather to every indictment that he has wrought against the Jews throughout the entire passage (1:18–32).

### Echoes of Idolatry

As a final piece of evidence that Paul is speaking primarily to the Jews, one can examine the Old Testament echoes in his rhetoric. Romans 1:23 and

33. Though not as specifically as in 2:17 where he says, “Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπνομιάζῃ.” Some may argue that Paul refers to the Gentiles in 1:18 where he also uses the word “all,” but in this instance “all” modifies “ungodliness and unrighteousness,” not “men.” In fact, he uses the participle κατεχόντων to significantly narrow down the category of men of which he is speaking (πάσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων). Thus 1:18, as with the rest of the verses in the pericope, refers primarily to the Jews.

34. See also Grieb, *Story of Romans*, 26.

35. Those who argue a case for “natural” or “general” revelation among the Gentiles must claim that such a vague form of revelation, made evident to them by either their observation of nature or of their own existence, holds them accountable for such a specific edict as this—a claim that seems rather unlikely. The more plausible option is that he is not talking about them, but rather about the Jews.

As regards homosexuality among the Jews, the Archaeological Study Bible offers the following commentary: “Indecent acts’ [ἀσχημοσύνην in 1:27] refer to sodomy, for which Sodom had become noted (Gen 19:5). God strictly forbade this practice (Deut 23:17)...and its presence was a sign of departure from the Lord (1 Kgs 14:24). Both Asa (1 Kgs 15:12) and Jehoshaphat took measures against this sin (1 Kgs 22:46), but its practice continued, until in the days of Josiah it was being practiced even in the Lord’s house (2 Kgs 23:7)” (*The Archaeological Study Bible* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005], 1835).

1:25 echo Psalm 106:19–21: “They made a calf at Horeb and worshiped a cast image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt.” These two verses in Romans also echo Jeremiah 2:11: “Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for something that does not profit.” A third example can be seen in Psalm 81:11–12 which is reminiscent of Rom 1:24, 26, and 28: “But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.” In each of these three instances, Israel is rebuked for turning from God to follow after idols.<sup>36</sup> Idolatry is man’s worship of anything other than God. At times the idols take the form of something in nature or a type of inanimate object. Other times the idolatry consists of exchanging the image of God—man—for God himself. This is the ultimate act of “the ax vaunt[ing] itself over the one who wields it” (Isa 10:15). Byrne comments on this backward phenomenon, “Idolatry represents the summit of ‘futility’ [Rom 1:21] in that it has human beings submitting themselves in worship to the creatures over which they were meant to rule.”<sup>37</sup> Such “exchang[ing] the truth about God for a lie” is parallel to exchanging natural intercourse for unnatural (Rom 1:25–27). Thus homosexuality is a form of idolatry which God strictly forbids just like all the other vices mentioned in this section (1:18–32),<sup>38</sup> and as such will likewise be a catalyst for the ushering in of God’s wrath. As Johnson indicates, wrath “is a concept that derives precisely from the prophetic warnings against idolatry” (see Isa. 51:7; Jer. 6:11; 25:25; Hos. 13:11; Zeph. 1:15).<sup>39</sup>

### Concluding Reflections

Although much has been said in this study to differentiate between Jew and Gentile, it seems as though the broader context of the Bible reveals much more of a fluidity between and interdependence of these terms. While the Bible reveals much of the story of the Jews throughout the years, how did the Gentiles come to be “Gentiles”? Were they always without the covenant, or was there, perhaps, an original unity of faith in the world? If such were the case, it could be argued that the Gentiles became “Gentiles” in the first instance by at one point being privy to the “truth” only to then refuse to honor or give thanks to God as such, thus “suppressing the truth” (κατεχόντων) in favor of a lie (Rom 1:18, 25). Hence ensued the wrath of God by which “their senseless

36. Again, the language here is very close to that found in Wisdom 13–14, but Paul does not address the Gentiles specifically as the Wisdom text does.

37. Byrne, *Romans*, 68. See also Rom 1:25 and Gen 1:26–28. Many commentators have made connections between idolatry and the story of Adam in Gen 3. I have a different take entirely on this matter, but the discussion that would result from the treatment of that view falls without the scope of this paper, thus I am intentionally avoiding the issue.

38. See Johnson, *Reading Romans*, 43.

39. Johnson, *Reading Romans*, 32.

minds were darkened” (1:21).<sup>40</sup>

In this sort of a hermeneutical context, Paul is, as mentioned above, telling the Jews their own story. In essence he is saying that because of their faithlessness they will become “Gentiles” in the sense that they will be without the covenant. At the same time, he is telling the Gentiles that because of their faithfulness they will become Jews, or rather, “Israel”—God’s covenant people, all of whom will be saved (11:26). The faithless Jews-turned-Gentiles (the natural branches of 11:21–24) will still be given the opportunity sometime in the future to return and enjoy the covenant nourishment flowing from the “rich root of the olive tree” (11:17) so long as “they do not persist in unbelief” (11:23). This fulfills the “first shall be last and last shall be first” imagery scattered throughout the Bible. The instances of this sort of language can be divided into two basic categories: those that talk about individuals or groups of people who will experience a reversal of roles on the one hand, and those that describe God himself on the other (see Isa 41:4; 44:6; 48:12; Matt 19:30; 20:16; Mark 9:35; 10:31; Luke 13:30; 1 Cor 15:45; Rev 1:11, 17; 2:8, 19; and 22:13 just to name a few). It is interesting to note the correlation here between the two types of passages: the former can be compared to the Jews and the Gentiles while the latter refer, instead, to a single being. Paul follows this imagery carefully in Romans: both Jews and Gentiles, to the extent that they are faithful, will become one united covenant people in Christ—Israel. Again, this resounds with the marital imagery found all throughout the Bible (See Psa 19:5; Isa 61:10; 62:5; Jer 7:34; 16:9; 25:10; 33:11; Joel 2:16; Matt 9:15; 25:1–10; Mark 2:19–20; Luke 5:34–35; John 3:29; Rev 18:23, etc.).<sup>41</sup> Christ is the bridegroom and the church is his covenant bride, Israel. The two come together to produce the good fruit of the gospel both at the present time and more especially at the eschaton.<sup>42</sup> In such a scenario, the story Paul is telling becomes the same story told by all the holy prophets since the world began—the tale of Israel and her salvific and glorious reunion with God through Jesus Christ.

Following the tradition of the apostle Paul, it seems somewhat fitting to conclude with a paranetic plea. If what has been argued is true, one can gain a better appreciation for both the glory and the severity of God’s covenants by reading the story of Israel in light of both its successes and its failures. The promised blessings are real and are based on the law of Christ through faith. God remains faithful and will surely bring to pass every promise he has made.

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40. Such an assertion would obviously assume an intrinsic unity between the Old and New Testament accounts, fusing the stories and teachings together as evidence of one divine whole. Thus the superimposition of the “Christian” interpretation would not be out of place within the “Jewish” context. Perhaps the terms “Christian” and “Jew” are also more fluid than people think.

41. See note 10 above.

42. This will come about following a period in which the bride (church) was abandoned “for a brief moment” (Isa 54:7—see the whole chapter for more on this sort of imagery).

The story of Israel persists today and will continue to flourish until the bridegroom comes again for his covenant bride. If we are to secure membership for ourselves in covenant Israel, we must reject idolatry in all of its decadent manifestations and strive to “live by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4; and Luke 4:4).