

John Burnett

Notes on Romans— Introductory

This is a synopsis of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections: New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

Introduction

This present commentary is a digest of NT Wright's monumental, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections: New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002). Wright's work engages primarily with the two major Roman Catholic commentaries of Fitzmyer and Byrne and the two major Protestant ones of Dunn and Moo,¹ but I have tried to digest it down to a size suitable for use in a reasonably demanding parish discussion group. Therefore I have severely curtailed Wright's footnotes and references, and as seemed fitting, occasionally added material from sources other than Wright.

Romans is by common consent St Paul's masterpiece, a work of massive substance, presenting formidable intellectual challenge and breathtaking theological and spiritual vision. Anyone who claims to understand it fully is mistaken, almost by definition. It's common to list saints and Christian leaders whose lives have been changed by reading it, and we could list a similar number who have radically misread it; troublingly, the lists would somewhat overlap. Anyone who claimed to have read all the commentaries, let alone all the other literature on Romans would be lying.

It has become customary to approach a biblical book by asking when, where, why, and by whom it was written and then, as a second stage, what it actually says. Some of these initial questions, fortunately, are not controversial in the case of Romans; nobody doubts that Paul

wrote it in the middle to late 50s of the first century, from Corinth or somewhere nearby, while planning his final voyage to Jerusalem with the intention of going on thereafter to Rome and thence to Spain; except for the dating, he talks about most of this in Rm 1 and 16. But the question of why he wrote has proved remarkably difficult. Romans stands as a reminder that 'why' and 'what' are more organically related than we have sometimes liked to think, as we will see.

The Shape and Theme of Romans

It's no good to pick out a few favorite lines to understand the whole of Romans. We might as well try to get the feel of a symphony by humming half a dozen bars from different movements. Like a symphony, Paul often anticipates his themes, to develop them later (often in counterpoint with each other); and then recapitulates and echoes them in other contexts after that. We will offer headings for the different sections, but we should not imagine that each section or paragraph is just 'about' the topic thereby indicated. That's not how Paul wrote. He tends, rather, to state a point in condensed fashion and then unpack it, like someone unfolding a map stage by stage so that each new piece offers both a fresh insight and a sense of what was there before. And the letter is a single piece— at almost no point does he offer detached reflections on isolated 'topics'. The letter shares some rhetorical features with other Greco-Roman letters, but it's impossible to pigeonhole in those terms. We have to follow the the inner logic of the whole work.

The easiest thing to determine about Romans is its basic shape. Four sections emerge clearly: Rm 1–4, 5–8, 9–11, and 12–16. However, the breaks— even the major ones at the ends of Rm 8 and 11— indicate that he's now going to write 'about' something else altogether. They just

¹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, AB 33 (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1993); Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, SP 6 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1996); James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Dallas: Word, 1988); James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B (Dallas: Word, 1988); Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

mark a shifting of gears within a single, sustained argument.

'God's Righteousness'

It's not hard to discover the main theme of the letter. 'God's good news unveils his righteousness': That's Paul's own summary in 1.16-17, and the letter does, indeed, unpack this dense statement. Unfortunately, though, to understand even this apparently simple sentence, we must examine the broader question of why a Jew like him would be concerned with this overarching issue.

'God's righteousness' in Paul's Judaism: covenant, lawcourt, apocalyptic

The phrase 'God's righteousness' (*dikaioynē theou*) summed up sharply and conveniently for first-century Jews *the expectation that the God of Israel would be faithful to the promises made to the patriarchs*.

Many Jews of Paul's day saw Israel's story from Abraham up to their own day, as a story still in search of a conclusion to be determined by the faithfulness of their God. As long as Israel remained under pagan occupation, God had not yet fulfilled the great promises he had made 'to our forefathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever' (cf Lk 1.55).

The Babylonian exile had come to an end some centuries before, but the promise of a glorious restoration of the nation, the Temple, and the whole Jewish way of life—were still awaiting fulfillment (see the Commentary on 9.6–10.21).² Loyal Jews living under the various post-Babylonian powers (Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, and finally Rome) continued to tell the story of Israel in terms of promises made to the patriarchs; of an early golden age under David and Solomon; of rebellion, decline, and exile; of a long period of waiting for restoration; and of the eventual new day of liberation that would dawn in God's good time. They believed that Yhwh had entered into covenant with them to do all this; paradoxically, the exile was itself, as Jeremiah, Daniel, and others had insisted, part of the covenant, since it was the result of Israel's disobedience. But God would remain loyal to the covenant, and would bring about the great day of liberation at last.³ The phrase that captures this whole train of thought, occurring in various forms in the Scriptures and post-biblical writings, is 'God's righteousness', in the sense of God's loyalty to the covenant with Israel (see,

e.g., Ps 33.4; Isa 40–55; Jr 32.41; Lm 3.23; Ho 2.20). The phrase is close to another great biblical theme, that of God's sure and steadfast covenant love for Israel— a point of considerable importance for understanding Romans, as we shall see.

Never leaving behind this covenantal meaning, the word 'righteousness' is also shaped by the Second Temple Jewish setting of the lawcourt. In the OT lawcourt, accuser and defendant pleaded their causes before a judge. 'Righteousness' was the status of the successful party when the case had been decided; 'acquitted' does not quite catch this, since our term 'acquitted' refers only to a successful *defendant*, whereas if the accuser was upheld in biblical law, s/he would be called 'righteous'. Thus 'vindicated' is thus more appropriate. The word has little if anything to do with morality or behavior, but rather with status in the eyes of the court— even though, once someone had been vindicated, the word 'righteous' would thus as it were work backward, coming to denote not only the legal status at the end of the trial but also the behavior that had occasioned this status. A good example of this is Gn 38.26, when Judah acknowledges that his daughter-in-law Tamar is 'righteous' and he's wrong. This was a legal position, not a moral one.

'Righteousness' also denoted the appropriate activity of the judge. His duty was to be impartial, to uphold the law, to punish wrongdoing, and to defend the weak who, like the orphan and the widow, had nobody else to defend them. The 'righteousness' of the judge and of the parties are two different things. The judge does not 'impute' his righteousness to the defendant. Nor does it have to do with the moral virtue of the persons concerned.

Covenant and lawcourt are far more closely linked than often imagined. Behind both stands a fundamental Jewish self-perception which holds many things together in passages throughout Romans, which interpreters have consistently separated. A deep-rooted and biblical viewpoint can be stated thus: *The covenant between God and Israel was established in the first place in order to deal with the problem of the world— with evil, corruption, and disintegration— and in particular to rescue humans from sin and death*.

In biblical thought, sin and evil are seen in terms of injustice— that is, of a fracturing of the social and human fabric. What is required, therefore, is that justice be done, not so much in the punitive sense that phrase often carries (though punishment can come into it), but in the fuller sense of setting to rights that which is out of joint, restoring things as they should be. Insofar, then, as God's covenant with Israel was designed to address the prob-

² Another Pauline passage that makes excellent sense on this reading is Ga 3.10-14.

³ This sequence of thought is clearly visible in passages like Ezr 9 and Dn 9.

lem of human sin and the failure of creation as a whole to be what its creator had intended it to be, the covenant was the means of bringing God's justice to the whole world.

'Justice' and 'righteousness' and related words translate the same Hebrew and Greek roots (Heb *sdq*; Gr *dik-*). God's righteousness seen in terms of covenant faithfulness and covenant lawsuit aimed at setting the world upright— at what we might call cosmic restorative justice.

The images of covenant and lawcourt thus draw together, within one complex range of imagery, a familiar Second Temple perception of the Jews' own story in relation to the rest of the world. Many Jewish writings of this period tell the story of Israel and the pagan nations in terms of a great cosmic lawsuit. When the psalmists beg God to vindicate them against their adversaries (e.g., in Ps 143), typically the pagan nations are oppressing Israel. Whether they are accusers and Israel the defendant, or whether Israel is accusing the pagans of wrongdoing is unimportant. Yhwh is not just Israel's God, but the creator of the whole world and its judge; as such, he's under an obligation to set things right, not least to vindicate the oppressed.⁴ Yhwh is the judge; the nations that make war upon Israel are to be tried and condemned; Israel is to be vindicated. This scene is classically portrayed in the seventh chapter of the book of Daniel.

It takes only a little reflection, and a little acquaintance with the Jewish history and literature of Paul's period, to see that a tension or conflict could arise between covenant and lawcourt meanings of 'righteousness'. Yhwh was supposed to come Israel's rescue because of the covenant obligations between them; but Yhwh was the judge in the cosmic court, committed to judging justly between Israel and nations and to establishing an appropriately just rule over the whole world. Is Israel guilty? What will Yhwh do then?⁵ That was a puzzle for many Jews in Paul's world and we may suppose it had been so for Paul as well; as a zealous Pharisee (his own self-description; see Ga 1.13-14; Ph 3.6), he must have longed to see God's righteousness revealed against wicked pagans and renegade Jews alike, vindicating covenant-faithful Jews like him. As we will see especially in Rm 7, there's no evidence that the pre-Christian Paul suffering from a bad or troubled conscience in the post-Augustinian sense, we must insist that there's every reason to suppose that he agonized over the fate of Israel,

longing for Yhwh to act decisively in history, but uncomfortably aware that if this were to happen, many Jews would face condemnation along with Gentiles.

All this brings into view a final dimension of the phrase 'God's righteousness'. Precisely because the term evoked covenant loyalty, on the one hand, and commitment to putting the whole world right, on the other, it was perhaps inevitable that Jews who longed for all this to happen would come to describe it in what we now call 'apocalyptic' language. We need to be clear, however, what we mean by this. 'Apocalyptic' is not so much a state of mind or a set of beliefs about the future, but a way of writing that uses highly charged and coded metaphors to express the cosmic or theological significance of God's vindicating activity. When Isaiah said, 'the stars will not give their light, and the sun and the moon will be darkened' (Isa 13.10), what he had in mind was the destruction of Babylon, not the end of the universe. Four beasts will emerge from the sea; what Daniel had in mind was the rise of great empires, not a literal description of strange future events. 'One like a son of man will come to the Ancient of Days'; what Daniel had in mind was 'the people of the saints of the Most High' (i.e., Israel) receiving the kingdom (Dn 7.13; compare Dn 7.22,27). So when Paul says, 'God's righteousness is being unveiled', he was saying that God was at last acting inside of history to vindicate Israel. The word for 'unveiled' or 'revealed' in Rom 1.17 is *apokalypsetai*, and within the first-century Jewish world, this meant the final unveiling within history of the secret plan that Israel's God had had in mind all along.

However, even though apocalyptic language didn't refer to literal cosmic events like the destruction of the universe, first-century Jews still supposed that their God would act suddenly and swiftly *within history* to bring about his long-delayed purposes. On the contrary, as the night grew darker, as pagan power increased, and as disloyalty within Israel itself became more rife, Jews like Paul prayed and longed for events that would demonstrate beyond any doubt that Israel's God was indeed the creator and judge of the whole world. The world would then see the truth for which it had longed, the justice for which it had striven. So in this sense, 'God's righteousness' is to be understood within a 'covenant', 'lawcourt', and 'apocalyptic' frame of reference.

'God's righteousness' as Paul's Christian question

Paul's thought world was a variation on the Second Temple Jewish worldview. However much his encounter with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus challenged and changed him, and however much he was now

⁴ In some biblical passages, Yhwh is Israel's adversary at law; Paul recognizes this as a theoretical and problematic possibility (see 3.5), but his argument sticks to the more usual conception.

⁵ This question, and the question of 'God's righteousness' that it raises, is a major theme of the book known *4 Ezra*, written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

speaking with pagans who did not share his Jewish assumptions, he still thought like a Jew and, most important, regarded Judaism as central to the One God's relation to the world. He quickly came to regard the events of Jesus' death and resurrection as the apocalyptic moment for which he and others had longed, and he rethought his previous way of viewing the story of Israel and the world as a result. But it still remained Jewish.

This can be seen precisely in Paul's vocation to be 'the apostle to the Gentiles', a theme of considerable significance for Romans. Paul did not take the message of Jesus the Messiah to the Gentiles out of mere frustration that his fellow Jews had refused it, as a kind of displacement activity, but rather out of the conviction that, if God's purposes had indeed now been fulfilled, it was time for the Gentiles to come in to the family that God had promised Abraham. As becomes increasingly clear, his Gentile mission was an eschatological activity—that is, a task undertaken in view of God's decisive act within history. His mission was a key feature of the new age that had now dawned, part of how God's future was arriving in the present, in the person and achievement of Jesus and the power of the Spirit. Although he clearly believed that there was a further and final event still to come, which he describes variously at different points in his writings, *the great promised 'end' had already begun to happen* (see particularly 1Cor 15.20-28).

This, of course, forced him to reconsider what Israel's God had promised. Had he suffered a change of mind? Or had Israel misunderstood his intentions? Jesus' death and resurrection, seen as the messianic events through which Israel's God had brought the covenant story to its unexpected climax, functioned for Paul like the fall of Jerusalem functioned for the author of *4 Ezra*: as the catalyst for a serious rethinking of God's promises and intentions, God's covenant faithfulness. Paul's point was that Israel's God had indeed been true to his covenant and promises—but in a very unexpected way.

This notion emerges particularly in Paul's view of the Torah, with which the letter to the Romans is hugely occupied, and which have earned him much criticism from his fellow Jews from that day to this. His fundamental insights were that

- (1) The Mosaic law was not intrinsic to the Abrahamic covenant, and thus
- (2) The Abrahamic covenant was fulfilled 'apart from the law' (3.21);
- (3) The Torah applied to Jews only, and hence was not relevant to the eschatological age when the Gentiles were coming in to God's people;

- (4) The Torah only intensified the problem of Adam's sin for those who were 'under the Torah', and thus was something from which its adherents needed to be freed; and
- (5) Nevertheless, the Torah had been given by God, had performed the paradoxical tasks assigned to it, and was now strangely fulfilled in the creation of the new people of God in the Messiah and by the Spirit.

In Jesus the Messiah, God had fulfilled what he had promised to the patriarchs. It was, of course, a sudden and surprising fulfillment, overturning cherished expectations, breaking in unexpectedly upon the worldview that Paul himself had cherished. We have to stress both the continuity, in Paul's mind, between his gospel and that which had gone before in Judaism, and the discontinuity, the sense of radical newness, of a divine purpose suddenly and shockingly unveiled. To soft-pedal either of these is to miss the inner tension and dynamic of Paul's thought. It is, in particular, to miss the peculiar force and glory of the letter to the Romans.

'God's righteousness' as the theme of Romans

Romans has suffered for centuries from being made to produce vital statements on questions it was not written to answer. All that has been said so far by way of historical and theological introduction will seem strange to those who read the letter assuming its central question is that of Martin Luther: 'How can I find a gracious God?' It will also seem strange to those who are looking for something they can 'apply to their everyday lives'.

If we start where Luther did, as many commentaries show, Paul's discussion of Israel and its Torah either takes second place or, worse, is relegated to a more abstract and generalized discussion of sin and law, and salvation in general, in which the question of Israel's fate is essentially a side issue. Romans is about 'justification by faith', meaning that people have to realize that they can't make themselves 'righteous' but instead have to rely on God's action in Christ, by which they can be reckoned as (morally) 'righteous' despite not having obeyed 'the law'— in the sense of any kind of moral code, whether the Ten Commandments or some other standard they have to 'measure up' to. A lot of modern self-help literature takes its start from this and leads to it. Unfortunately or not, Paul isn't discussing any of this—at all.

This 'righteousness', the status now enjoyed by God's people in the Messiah, is described in Ph 3.9 as 'a righteousness from God (*hē ek theou dikaiosynē*). Many have suggested that this is what Rm 1.17 and elsewhere refers

to as 'God's righteousness' (*dikaiosynē theou*). However, when the latter phrase occurs in biblical and post-biblical Jewish texts, it always refers to *God's own righteousness*, not to any status that people get from God; and Jewish discussions of 'God's righteousness' in this sense show close parallels with Paul's arguments in Romans.⁶

In particular, the flow of thought through the letter as a whole makes far more sense if we understand the statement of the theme in 1.17 as being about *God and his own covenant faithfulness and justice*, rather than the 'justification' of sinners.⁷ It brings Rm 9–11, which is all about Israel— one entire quarter of the letter!— into focus not as an appendix to a discussion of sin and salvation, but as the intended *climax* of the whole letter; and it allows 15.1–13 to be a summary of the discussion as a whole, rather than an unexplained 'foreign insertion'. Within this larger theme, there's still room for the justification and salvation of individuals. But these topics are held within a larger discussion of what God is up to. Even for individual salvation, context is everything. Paul wants to explain to the Roman church what God has been up to and where they belong on the map of his purposes.

Accustomed as we are to translating *dikaiosynē* as 'righteousness', we should nonetheless recognize that the other meaning, 'justice', is not far away. The sense of covenant faithfulness and the sense of things being put right were not far removed in the mind of a Jew like Paul. Just as the Messiah was destined to be Lord of the world, so also, and for the same reasons, God's covenant with Israel had always been intended as the means of putting God's world right. When God unveiled his righteousness, the world would receive justice— that rich, restorative, much-to-be-longed-for justice of which the psalmists had spoken with such feeling (e.g., Pss 67.4; 82.8). Even a quick skim through Romans shows that this is indeed what Paul was talking about, though of course full justification of the point awaits the detail of the commentary.

Paul was coming to *Rome* with the gospel message of Jesus the Jewish Messiah, the Lord of the world, claiming that, through this message, God's justice was unveiled once and for all. Rome prided itself on being, as it were, the capital of justice, the source from which justice would flow throughout the world. The Roman goddess

Iustitia ('Justice'), like the Caesar cult itself, was a comparative novelty in Paul's world; the temple to *Iustitia* was established in 13 AD, and *Iustitia* was among the virtues celebrated by Augustus's famous *clipeus virtutis*, the golden 'shield of virtue' set up in the Senate and inscribed with the emperor's virtues (27 BC). So close is the link between the new imperial regime and the virtue *Iustitia* that this goddess sometimes acquires the title 'Augusta'.⁸ So, without losing any its deeply Jewish meaning of the covenant faithfulness of the creator God, Paul's declaration that the gospel of King Jesus reveals God's *dikaiosynē* must also be read as a deliberate challenge to the imperial pretension. If it's justice you want, he implies, you will find it, but not in the 'good news' (*euangelion*) that announces Caesar as Lord, but in the *euangelion* of Jesus.⁹ The rest of Romans will show that this meaning is indeed in Paul's mind at point after point.

Paul is not shuttling to and fro between 'Jewish' and 'Gentile' contexts. The covenant people of God was to be the means through which God would reveal his divine purpose for all creation. When God at last fulfilled the covenant, the Gentile world would see, unveiled, what its own life was about. Some Jews saw God's covenant people Israel *itself* to be the divine purpose for the whole creation. When he revealed his purposes, the nations would discover that their role was simply to serve Israel. This idea is still taught in some parts of Judaism today. Romans is largely about why and how this is not correct. But the very Jewish, very biblical revelation of God's righteousness/justice a revelation of the true *Iustitia*, which really did accomplish what Caesar's *Iustitia* falsely claimed to do— namely, the putting right the whole of creation. We have only to think for a moment of Isaiah 40–55 to see how similar the train of thought is: Israel's God will reveal righteousness and salvation, confronting pagan empire as the sovereign creator and rescuing his covenant people in the process. All this, too, will emerge at various points throughout the letter and the commentary.

Summary of the Letter to the Romans

The following is a highly compressed summary of the flow of the letter, which gradually unpacks the summary statement of the introduction: 'For God's righteousness is being revealed in the gospel from faith to faith, just as it is written, "The righteous one will live by faith"' (1.1–17).

Rm 1–4 God's gospel unveils the fact that in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the God of Israel

⁶ Obvious passages include Dt 33.21; Jg 5.11; 1Sm 12.7; Ne 9.8; Ps 45.4; 72.1–4; 103.6; Isa 40–55 (e.g., 41.10; 45.13; 46.12–13); Dn 9.7–9, 14, 16; Mi 6.5; Wi 5.18; *Ps Sol* 1.10–15; 2Bar 44.4; 78.5; 4Ezr 7.17–25; 8.36; 10.16; 14.32; *TDan* 6.10; 1QS 10.25–6; 11.12; 1QM 4.6.

⁷ Statistically, the word 'God' (*theos*) occurs with far more frequency in Romans (once every 46 words) than any other Pauline work. Paul's other letters are also, of course, 'about' God, but Romans makes *God* and his justice, love, and reliability its major themes.

⁸ On *Iustitia*, the Roman equivalent of *Dikē*, see, e.g., Ovid *Letters from the Black Sea* 3.6.25; the *Acts of Augustus* Rm 34.

⁹ On this topic generally, see RA Horsely, ed., *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Trinity, 1997).

has been true to his covenant with Abraham and thus has brought saving order to the whole world. In the face of a world in rebellion and a chosen people unfaithful to their commission, God has, through the surrogate faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah, created a worldwide— that is, a Jewish and Gentile— family for Abraham, marked out by the covenant sign of faith.

Rm 5–8 God has thus done what the covenant was set up to do: to address and solve the problem expressed in biblical terms as the Adam’s sin and its effects. In Jesus the Messiah, God has done for this new Jewish and Gentile people what he did for Israel of old in fulfillment of the promise to Abraham: Redeemed them from the Egypt of sin, led them through the Red Sea of baptism, given them the Spirit (not the Torah) in the wilderness of this present life, and he is leading them to the inheritance, which will consist of the entire redeemed creation. This is how the creator will finally put the whole world right. All this is the result of God’s astonishing, unchanging, self-giving covenant love expressed completely and finally in the death of Jesus.

Rm 9–11 This section highlights the peculiar tragedy of Israel’s failure to believe in the Messiah. This, too, however, turns out to be within God’s strange purposes, for Israel’s fall, acting out on a grand scale the death of Jesus, is the means by which salvation can extend to the whole world. Jews are not thereby barred from participating in the covenant blessing; Paul himself is a counter-example, and God desires that even now, by recognizing that the Gentiles are enjoying the promised blessings, more of Paul’s fellow Jews will come to share in new covenant membership. Gentile Christians, therefore, are warned severely against anti-Jewish arrogance. The section ends with a paean of praise for the strange but glorious purposes of God.

Rm 12–16 The community created by this good news must live as the true, renewed humanity, in its internal and external life. In particular, it must reflect God’s intention that Jew and Gentile come together as one worshipping body in the Messiah. Paul’s own plans are bent to this end, and his greetings to differ-

ent groups in the Roman church may indicate his desire to bring together disparate groups in common worship and mission.

How then may we understand the *letter’s* situation, and how does the shape and detailed content of the letter address it?

The Historical Occasion for Romans

Two main ‘situational’ aims surface in the great climactic passages of 11.11-32 and 15.7-13. Each has in view the relationship between Jews and Gentiles; the former, however, addresses Christian Gentiles who are faced with non-Christian Jews, and the latter addresses a community in which Christian Gentiles and Christian Jews find themselves in uneasy coexistence. Although the details remain unclear, it’s certain that a large proportion of Rome’s substantial Jewish population had to leave the city in the late 40s AD following rioting that may have resulted from early Christian preaching among the Jewish community in Rome. The Emperor Claudius expelled them, but after his death in 54, Nero rescinded his decree. This historical sequence produces a situation into which Romans fits like a glove.

On the one hand, Roman anti-Jewish sentiment, for which there’s abundant evidence in late antiquity, create a context in which many Romans would be glad to see the Jews gone and sorry to see them return. How easy, then, for the Gentile Christians who remained in Rome through the early 50s to imagine that God had somehow endorsed what Caesar had enacted at the political level and that God had in fact written the hated Jews out of the covenant altogether. How easy, also, when the Jews returned to take up their property and positions in society, to suppose that, though the new faith would spread to include other Gentiles, there was no point in attempting to win over any more Jews.

But Paul was coming to Rome with a gospel that was ‘God’s power for salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek’ (1.16). If the Roman church were to accept his gospel, and indeed to support him in his mission from Rome to Spain, they needed to realize that, even as the apostle to the Gentiles, he remained under obligation to his fellow Jews as well. Paul’s travel plans in Rm 15 are thus woven into the same picture: Having been undermined by the apparent failure of his earlier home base in Antioch to support him in his practice of incorporating believing Gentiles into the same social structure as believing Jews (see Ga 2.11-21), he was determined that in the western Mediterranean he was going to make things clear from the start.

On the other hand, Jewish Christians who had returned to Rome would now be facing the difficult question of

how to live together with Gentile Christians in one family with those who cherished very different cultural traditions, not least food taboos. Paul knows that this will not be solved overnight and stresses instead that there are some things over which Christians can legitimately disagree, and they should not impair common worship. Underneath it all, Paul's wants to see the Scriptures fulfilled: 'Rejoice, you Gentiles, with God's people!' (15.10, quoting Dt 32.43).

Romans 9–11 and 12–16 thus are explicable in terms of the double situation of the Roman church and Paul's agendas in addressing them. Why, then, does he write Rm 1–8? Are they just an extended introduction, before Paul reaches his real point?

No; rather, if he's to address the deep-rooted problems of the interrelationship between Jews and Gentiles within God's purposes, Paul must go down to those deep roots themselves: to creation and fall, covenant and Torah, to Israel's covenant failure and God's covenant faithfulness. He must show how the death and resurrection of Jesus, the basic proclamation of the 'good news', are God's solution to the complex problems of Israel and the world. These events have called into existence a people, composed of Jew and Gentile alike, led by God's Spirit and defined not by Torah but by faith, in whom all the promises of God have come true. Only if they understand the roots can his hearers sense the poignant tragedy of Israel's situation (Rm 9) and move toward the main pastoral thrust of the letter (Rm 12–16). Only so can they appreciate the subtle logic of the argument that he then mounts. And only so can they be equipped for the larger questions that hover in the background—questions of the relation of Jesus' new empire with that of Caesar, of the justice of God facing the justice of Rome.

At the same time, the chapters in which he lays the foundation for his specific arguments can stand almost on their own as a statement of what God has done in the Messiah for the whole world. Here we must be careful. Romans is a tightly knit, coherent whole with an inner logic that affects every word and sentence. But the arguments of Rm 1–4, on the one hand, and Rm 5–8, on the other, do have their own integrity. This is perhaps particularly true of Rm 5–8, with christological refrains tolling like a great bell at the end of almost every section. Here, if anywhere, Jesus is the lens through which we see the God working out his saving plan. At the same time, precisely this section, for just this reason, sets up the argument of Rm 9–11. It's not just that, having written Rm 1–8, he finds he has to go on to 9–11; it's just as much that, because he wants to write Rm 9–11, he finds he must write 1–8 in this way. Thus in key passages in

Romans 1–8, Paul seems deliberately to set up problems and questions that he then leaves hanging in the air, only to resume them in Rm 9–11 (the most obvious place where this occurs is 3.1-8, where Paul asks, essentially, 'What then of Israel' and doesn't give the answer until Rm 11).