

PAUL, THE LAW, JEWS, AND GENTILES: A CONTEXTUAL  
AND EXEGETICAL READING OF ROMANS 2:12–16

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I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of Jewish and Christian relations is one that occupies public attention to this day. This reality was evidenced with the dedication of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington on April 22, 1993. The report of the ceremonies, on the front page of the Chicago Tribune on April 23, brought the issue into bold relief. In a touching photograph, Vice President Albert Gore is seen with his arm around a Christian woman who had hidden several Jews during the days of the Holocaust, one of whom she eventually married. If a picture is indeed worth a thousand words, this picture evokes a myriad of questions and assertions, many of which have infiltrated academic communities and imposed their agendas upon scholarly enquiry with great vigor.

The present discussion will, in some degree, reflect this trend. The passage under investigation, Rom 2:12–16, addresses the Jew/non-Jew relationship from the perspective of that which is integral in defining the essence of being Jewish: the place of the Law in God's dealings with Jews and Gentiles. The passage raises several important questions. What is the relationship of the Law to Gentiles? Is there a "natural law" that is the Gentile equivalent to the Jewish Law? How is "conscience" implicated in the argument? Can Gentiles receive salvation through obedience to this natural law in the same manner in which the Jews were thought to be able to be saved through their Law? Is Paul's argumentation in 2:12–16 a "flat contradiction" to the position articulated in 3:9 and 20?<sup>1</sup>

This essay will investigate these and related questions. The organization of this enquiry is as follows. Rom 2:12–16 will first be examined with regard to its place in its literary context. This will require definition of the boundaries of the literary context as well as of the flow of Paul's argumentation in this section of the epistle. Against the background of the literary context, 2:12–16 will receive its exegetical consideration. Finally, some theological implications of this treatment will be considered.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1983) 103. E. P. Sanders (*Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983] 125) similarly asserts that Paul's argumentation in Rom 1:18–2:29 is "internally inconsistent and it rests on gross exaggeration."

## II. SURVEY OF LITERARY CONTEXT

In many ways, delineation of a literary context for Rom 2:12–16 is arbitrary and as varied as the scholars who interact with the passage. R. Jewett argues that the entire epistle must serve as the literary context when discussing the issue of the Law as it relates to Jews and Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> F. Watson sees chaps. 1–11 as providing the theoretical legitimation for the social re-orientation of 14:1–15:13.<sup>3</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield further narrows the context by delineating 1:18–8:39, and more specifically 1:18–4:25, as the literary context.<sup>4</sup> Several others have recognized 1:18–3:20 as the context most pertinent for the study of 2:12–16.<sup>5</sup> We shall see that the flow of Paul’s argumentation in 1:18–3:20 recommends it as the proper literary context for this study.

In 1:18–3:20, Paul is concerned to establish the foundation for his exposition of “justification by faith,” which follows in 3:21–4:25. This foundation is essentially that both Jews and Gentiles stand in need of the redemptive work of Christ as appropriated by faith. Paul’s strategy is to demonstrate that both parties stand under the prospect of divine judgment without favoritism (οὐ προσωποληψία, 2:11). That Gentiles stand under God’s judgment would be evident to Jews. However, 2:1–29 demonstrates that, despite their several “advantages” over Gentiles, Jews were susceptible to the judgment reserved for Gentiles, and this liability lay precisely in their relationship to the Law. A brief overview of the stages of Paul’s argumentation will demonstrate Paul’s strategy and intent.

1. *1:18–32.* Paul begins by arguing that “pagans” are currently under the wrath of God for the expressed reason that they did not walk in the knowledge of the Creator that should have been clearly evident to them through their observation of the created order (vv. 18–20). Rather than worshipping the true God, they gave themselves over to the worship of images fashioned in the likeness of created beings (vv. 21–23, 25). The first hint of the nature of God’s revealed wrath against them is the abandonment of their darkened minds to sexual impurity (v. 24). The nature of this perversity is spelled out in vv. 26–27. In v. 28, Paul confirms in bold relief the substance of God’s wrath against such people (cf. v. 24), detailing the resulting sentence of depravity pronounced upon them (vv. 29–31). Verse 32 provides Paul’s conclu-

<sup>2</sup> R. Jewett, “The Law and the Coexistence of Jews and Gentiles in Romans,” *Int* 39 (1985) 341–356.

<sup>3</sup> F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: a Sociological Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 107.

<sup>4</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1975) 1:101–102. D. E. Aune (“Romans as a *Logos Protrepitkos*,” in *The Romans Debate*, revised edition [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1977, 1991] 290–292) similarly sees the literary context as 1:16–4:25.

<sup>5</sup> J.-N. Aletti, “Rm 1,18–3,20: Incohérence ou Cohérence de l’Argumentation Paulinienne?” *Bib* 69 (1988) 47–62; G. P. Carras, “Romans 2,1–29: a Dialogue on Jewish Ideals,” *Bib* 73 (1992) 185; L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987) 119–122; Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* 101–2.

sion to this discussion: although provided with some knowledge of God's just ordinance (τὸ δίκαιωμα) and the consequences of disobedience, they practice and approve of their depravity.

2. 2:1–29. It is here that Paul turns his attention away from Gentile depravity and begins to focus it upon Jewish culpability. Carras<sup>6</sup> has divided Paul's treatment of Jews in chap. 2 into four sections, each of which addresses an objection that Paul's Jewish "critic" raises in defense of the position that the Jew has a privileged status before God.<sup>7</sup> These objections relate to supposed Jewish moral superiority (vv. 1–11), possession of Torah (vv. 12–16), Jewish national privilege (vv. 17–24), and circumcision (vv. 25–29).

Jewish Moral Superiority (2:1–11). Paul's indictment against the supposed moral superiority of Jews over Gentiles introduces this section with poignancy. He immediately calls this position into question by noting that "everyone who judges" (πᾶς ὁ κρίνων) those described in 1:18–32 has no basis for feelings of superiority because the "judge" is guilty of similar transgressions (cf. vv. 17–24). God will judge "both Jew first and then Gentile" (vv. 9, 10) on the basis of each individual's works (vv. 6–11). Though some Jewish sources know of the position that the Jews, on the basis of their covenantal status with God, would be shown preferential treatment with respect to the judgment of God,<sup>8</sup> Paul draws from Jewish tradition by quoting Ps 62:12 (v. 6; cf. Amos 3:2; Prov 24:12) to demonstrate that it is on the basis of *individual* rather than *covenantal* status that one will be judged in the eschatological judgment (v. 5). Paul concludes this section with a summary statement that parallels v. 6: "For there is no favoritism with God" (οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν προσωποληψία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ).

Possession of the Law (2:12–16). This section will receive treatment below. Suffice it to say that the issue here is more specific than general moral superiority. Possession of the Law is raised as an objection to Paul's argument in 2:1–11. Paul now proceeds to show in both negative and positive terms that possession of the Law does not provide the Jew with preferential treatment. Negatively, Paul asserts that the Law will be the basis of judgment for those who sin under it (vv. 12–13). Positively, Paul asserts that the Law, in some sense, can and has been obeyed by those who do not possess it (vv. 14–15). At any rate, it will be the gospel that will provide the norm for eschatological judgment (v. 16).

<sup>6</sup> Carras, "Romans 2,1–29" 193–206.

<sup>7</sup> J. D. G. Dunn ("New Perspective on Paul and the Law," in *The Romans Debate* 307) argues that Paul here was intent upon making the distinction between covenant/law and ethnic Israel, a connection which had become prevalent in his day. S. Westerholm (*Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988] 159) similarly argues that Paul's intent here is not to prove that Jews sin, but that Jews, despite their privileges, are as responsible as the Gentiles for their own sins.

<sup>8</sup> Wis 11:9–10 reads, "For when they were tried, though they were being disciplined in mercy, they learnt how the ungodly were tormented when judged in wrath. For thou didst test them as a father does in warning, but thou didst examine the ungodly as a stern king does in condemnation." Cf. Wis 12:22.

Jewish National Privilege (2:17–24). Paul opens this section by compiling an impressive list of advantages that can be claimed by Jews, on the basis of their covenantal status before God, to affirm their privileged status (vv. 17–20). Having built the case of his “critic,” Paul then launches into a series of allegations that demonstrate that Jewishness is not a sufficient basis for a claim to be distinct from other groups in relationship with God (vv. 21–24). He challenges their claim to be teachers of those who do not know the Law (vv. 19–20) by showing that they fail to heed their own teaching (v. 21a). Through a series of specific allegations, he then challenges their adherence to that which they claim to follow (vv. 21b–22). He notes that Jews in fact do steal, commit adultery, and in effect commit idolatry through dishonoring the temple.<sup>9</sup> Paul concludes this section by arguing that such behavior dishonors the God whom Jews claim to serve (vv. 23–24). Paul cites Isa 52:5 (cf. Ezek 36:22) to cement this allegation. In viewing this section, it is wise to keep in mind that Paul here is not condemning Judaism as a whole nor every individual Jew as perpetrator of these acts. Rather, all that can be said confidently in this context is that there are ill-behaved Jews among Jewry as are there well-behaved Gentiles in the pagan world (cf. 2:14–15). All Paul needs to demonstrate here is that the described activities can and have occurred, and that God is dishonored among Gentiles through them.<sup>10</sup>

Circumcision (2:25–29). It is striking that here Paul is separating circumcision from the Law per se. That is, Paul considers circumcision as a category separate from, but related to, the Law. Paul’s focus is to distinguish between a literal and a non-literal understanding of circumcision. True circumcision is identified by obedience to the Law, not by the physical mark itself. Therefore, a man’s status before God is an internal, spiritual reality, marked by obedience to the Law rather than externalities. Negatively, disobedience can disqualify Jews from genuine covenantal relationship. Positively, obedience can qualify Gentiles for such status. Such an obedient person, whether Jew or Gentile, can find right standing before God.

3. 3:1–8. In light of the foregoing discussion in 2:1–29, Paul addresses the objection of his “critic” as to the advantage of the Jew in light of Paul’s construction of spiritual reality. Such questioning will later find an echo in 9:4–5. But here Paul focuses upon the faithfulness of God in graciously granting the privilege of the Law to Israel. Paul is laying the groundwork for his exposition of the need for Christ and justification by faith in 3:21–4:25 and of salvation history in chaps. 9–11. Paul introduces the tension of God’s faithfulness and justice, arguing for full place for both in God’s dealings with the Jews.

<sup>9</sup> Carras (“Romans 2,1–29” 201) notes that it is best not to take Paul literally here when he alleges that Jews robbed the temple, for in general Jews did not do so. He does cite Josephus (*Ant.* 18:81–84) as an example where a Jew did in fact rob from the temple (cf. *Ant.* 4:18; Acts 19:37).

<sup>10</sup> Carras, “Romans 2,1–29” 199–200.

4. 3:9–20. Paul climaxes his argumentation with the conclusion to which he has been building throughout. This section contains a catena of biblical passages intended to support the statement of v. 9: “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.” Paul concludes the section (v. 20) with the startling assertion that no one can be righteous in the sight of God by observing the Law, for the Law makes one conscious of sin. This appears to be the thrust of v. 19, which seems to draw the conclusion from the preceding scriptural citations that the Law itself affirms that no one can find justification before God through the Law. Moreover, this section seems to draw out the implications of 3:1–8. If the giving of the Law was supposed to be an act of grace, how can it simultaneously be that which opens individuals to the judgment of God? The point of 3:9–20 is straightforward, even if it is not abundantly clear as to how it follows what precedes. All are under sin, whether Jew or Gentile. Scripture (the Law?) itself confirms this fact. As such, all are in need of the means by which to stand justified before God. It is to this need that Paul will turn, beginning with chap. 4.

### III. EXEGESIS OF ROMANS 2:12–16

1. *Verse 12.* With γάρ, Paul begins to draw out the implications of Jewish possession of the Law in light of the statement in v. 11: οὐ γάρ ἐστιν προσωποληψία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ. Further background to v. 12 may be seen in the repetition of the formula Ἰουδαίος τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλλήν (2:9, 11; 3:9; cf. 1:17). By way of parallelism, v. 12 states the conditions under which Gentiles and Jews both sin and come under judgment:

Ἔσοι γὰρ ἀνόμως ἡμαρτον,	ἀνόμως	καὶ ἀπολοῦνται,
καὶ ἔσοι ἐν νόμῳ ἡμαρτον,	διὰ νόμου	κριθήσονται.

It is suggestive that Paul has chosen ἀπόλλυμι to describe the fate of the Gentiles. The term is used in the LXX to describe the fate of Israel’s enemies (e.g., Pss 9:4, 6–7, 37; 36:20; 67:2; 72:27; 79:16). With this the Jew could concur. However, it is noteworthy that the term is also used in the LXX to indicate Israel’s own fate for unfaithfulness (Deut 4:26; 8:19–20; 11:17; 28:20, 22, 24, 45, 52; 30:18). The term of choice for the Jew, κρίνω, though it can mean judgment in the sense of vindication (e.g., Deut 32:36 LXX), probably means “condemn” (e.g., Rom 3:6–7; 2 Thess 2:12). This finds support in the context of sin/judgment in the passage, its occurrence in the passive voice, and its probable reference to eschatological judgment (cf. v. 16).

This verse has four occurrences of νόμος or related forms. At this point some comments regarding the term and its meaning will be helpful in preparation for the significant place of the term in the immediate context. M. Winger<sup>11</sup> has conducted a study of the use of νόμος in the Pauline letters based on syntagmatic patterns in Paul’s usage. Interacting with studies that

<sup>11</sup> M. Winger, *By What Law? The Meaning of Νόμος in the Letters of Paul* (SBLDS; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990).

have sought to identify categories of Paul's use of νόμος,<sup>12</sup> Winger concludes that νόμος has seven different components that separately receive emphasis based upon contextual considerations, but all of which are always present in Paul's usage.<sup>13</sup> These seven components are: 1) νόμος is *verbal or perceived*; 2) νόμος is a standard for *judgment*; 3) νόμος is a *guide to conduct*; 4) νόμος *controls*; 5) νόμος is tied to a *particular people*; 6) νόμος as a *source*; and 7) people *put themselves under* νόμος. Whatever one's assessment of Winger's study, the important factor to keep in mind here is that the content of νόμος is complex and constant, yet aspects of it come to light in differing contexts.

D. J. Moo<sup>14</sup> notes that Paul's use of νόμος is determined mainly by the OT/Jewish use of תורה, usually translated with νόμος in the LXX. The referent of νόμος in the LXX, as is the case with תורה in its typical OT meaning, is the Sinaitic legislation of commands and sanctions delivered by God to the Israelites through Moses. Given Paul's Jewish heritage, it would be natural for him to follow suit in his usage of the term, and a survey of Paul's usage of νόμος shows that in over ninety percent of its occurrences it refers to the Mosaic Law. The occurrences of the νόμος word group in 2:12–16, where the point of discussion is precisely the Mosaic Law, clearly conform to this tendency. Even in those instances where the term appears to be more broadly conceived, such as in v. 14 where νόμος designates in a more general sense "divine law," the locus of Paul's usage is the Mosaic Law, from which a more extended sense is developed by borrowing from this central conception.<sup>15</sup>

It should also be noted that attempts to find significance in articular or anarthrous occurrences of νόμος, especially as the term relates to the Mosaic Law, are misguided. Several considerations, many stylistic, seem to impinge upon Paul's use of the article in reference to the Mosaic Law.<sup>16</sup> In the present context, the contrast drawn between those ἀνόμους (Gentiles) and those ἐν νόμῳ/διὰ νόμου (Jews) would seem to indicate that these anarthrous occurrences of νόμος have the Mosaic Law in view. This conclusion also finds support in light of the Jewish understanding that the Law will be the measure of judgment.<sup>17</sup>

2. *Verse 13.* By means of antithetical parallelism, Paul draws a distinction between hearing and doing the Law, as both pertain to righteous standing before God.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 21–32. See literature cited there.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 35–40. His tabular presentations of data (esp. 37, 39) are quite helpful in following his argument.

<sup>14</sup> D. J. Moo, *Romans 1–8* (Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1991) 146–147.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 146–147. While Moo argues that Paul's usage of νόμος focuses primarily on the Mosaic Law as pertains to God's command upon Israel, he notes that Paul's usage is sufficiently flexible to refer to the OT, the Pentateuch, or the "law-administration" of the OT, or to extend the demand of God to other peoples. Even when the Hellenistic usage of νόμος in the sense of "principle" or "norm" fits Paul's usage, there is nevertheless a rhetorical connection to the Mosaic Law. See p. 152 for discussion and the citations of examples from Paul's letters.

<sup>16</sup> *BDF* Sec. 258; Cranfield, *Romans* 154; E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 62.

<sup>17</sup> *Jub.* 5:13; *2 Apoc. Bar.* 48:47; *Ps-Philo, Lib. Ant.* 11:1–2.

οὐ γὰρ οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου δίκαιοι παρὰ [τῶ] θεῶ,  
ἀλλ' οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου δικαιοθήσονται.

That doing of the Law, in addition to an understanding or hearing of the Law, is characteristic of Judaism is well documented in the Jewish sources<sup>18</sup> and of itself is not original with Paul. However, in the Jewish sources, “hearing” (שמע) had a more positive connotation.<sup>19</sup> This fact can be seen in the importance of the Shema (Deut 6:4) in Jewish piety. Dunn observes that the collocation of οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου and δίκαιοι was closely complementary and overlapping in the Jewish mind.<sup>20</sup> The unique application of Paul, as illustrated in the contrast of v. 13, is the driving of a wedge between these related elements of Jewish thought, between his conception of “doing the Law” and the Jewish notion of heedful hearing.<sup>21</sup>

Paul’s use here of δίκαιοι/δικαιοθήσονται inevitably raises the question as to whether Paul here affirms a doctrine of “justification by works.” C. K. Barrett<sup>22</sup> denies that any sense of the Christian notion of justification is present here. Rather, he focuses explicitly upon the sentence—condemnation or acquittal—pronounced in the eschatological judgment. Others, however, affirm that Paul here is affirming exactly what he appears to be saying—works have a place in justification and judgment.<sup>23</sup> Such a position finds OT support,<sup>24</sup> but more importantly, it finds a place in Paul.<sup>25</sup> It is here that literary context is of more importance than Paul’s overall theological framework. At this stage of his argumentation, Paul is not concerned with defining his precise doctrine of justification (this will come in 3:21–4:25). Rather, Paul is here concerned to address the Jewish identification of the δίκαιοι and the grounds for their justification, and to show that in some sense “doing the Law” is required for justification, but that this is in no way inextricably bound up with membership in the Jewish covenantal community.<sup>26</sup>

3. *Verse 14.* The issue raised in v. 14, ὅταν γὰρ ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν, οὗτοι νόμον μὴ ἔχοντες ἑαυτοῖς εἰσὶν νόμος, have occasioned much discussion in the history of interpretation. K. Snodgrass

<sup>18</sup> Deut 4:1, 5–6, 13–14; 1 Macc 2:67; 13:48; Philo, *Cong.* 70; *Praem.* 79; Josephus, *Ant.* 20:44; *m. Abot* 1:17; 5:14.

<sup>19</sup> Deut 30:12–13; Josephus, *Ant.* 5:10; *Syb. Or.* 3:70; Acts 15:21.

<sup>20</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988) 97.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* Dunn notes that the most Jewish writings of the NT parallel this distinction in their understandings of radical interpretation of the Law and of what fulfillment of the Law really means (cf. Matt 7:24–27; Jas 1:22–25).

<sup>22</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (HNTC; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987 reprint of 1957 ed.) 50.

<sup>23</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 98; H. Ridderbos, *Paul: an Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 178–181; K. R. Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace—to the Doers: an Analysis of the Place of Romans 2 in the Theology of Paul,” *NTS* 32 (1986) 74.

<sup>24</sup> Pss 9:8–21; 37:9, 37; 58:12; 62:10, 13; 96:10, 13; Job 34:11; Prov 10:16; 24:12; Eccl 12:14; Isa 3:10–11; 59:18; Jer 17:10; 25:14; 32:19; Lam 3:64; Hos 4:9.

<sup>25</sup> Rom 14:10–12; 1 Cor 3:13–15; 2 Cor 5:10; 9:6; 11:15; Gal 6:7; Col 3:25; Eph 6:8; 1 Tim 5:24–25; 2 Tim 4:14.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 98.

has outlined the major lines of interpretation of this passage as they relate to this phrase, particularly with respect to the bases of judgment:

- Paul is speaking only hypothetically *as if* the law could be fulfilled and *as if* the gospel had not come. What Paul really believes one finds in 3:9–10 and 3:20–21.
- Paul was speaking of Gentile Christians who fulfill the law through faith in Christ and a life in the Spirit.
- This section and other texts speaking of judgment represent unexpurgated and unnecessary fragments from Paul’s Jewish past.
- This chapter reflects a contradiction in Paul’s thought which must be allowed to stand.
- Paul only means to say in 2:14–15 that Gentiles have a law and therefore are responsible and will be judged. There is only one outcome for both Jews and Gentiles on the basis of works, and it is negative.<sup>27</sup>

Snodgrass notes that these theories have arisen in attempts to “explain away” this difficult text, and suggests that the best alternative is to allow the passage—including this mention of the Gentiles—to stand as it is without such “explaining away.” More precisely, the passage as it stands must be viewed in the context of Paul’s argument as we examine its several difficult details.

Background to this phrase may be found in L. Gaston’s helpful discussion of particularism and individualism in first-century Judaism as related to the Gentile problem.<sup>28</sup> He argues that two extreme positions held some prominence in this period. One such position asserts that “all Israel has a share in the world to come” (*m. Sanh.* 10:1), while another affirms that there exist “righteous among the nations of the world who have a share in the world to come” (*t. Sanh.* 13:2). Since in the Jewish world it was axiomatic that righteousness was connected to living in relationship with the Creator as defined in the Torah, the question arises as to how Gentiles, who do not have the commandments of the Torah, can be declared righteous. Much of the speculation on this matter is late for present purposes,<sup>29</sup> although on two heads it was deemed possible that Gentiles could have sufficient knowledge of Torah to be declared as the “righteous among the nations.” One such source is found in the tradition that God had offered the Torah, in all of its Sinaitic completeness, to all nations of the world before it found acceptance in Israel.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Snodgrass, “Justification by Grace” 73. See the literature cited there, and his discussion of these alternatives (73–75). A similar treatment is found in L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 147–149.

<sup>28</sup> Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* 23–27.

<sup>29</sup> Maimonides posited that Gentiles could be called righteous if they lived in accordance with the Noahic commandments. Some speculation viewed Adam (cf. Gen 2:16) as the best figure of comparison when speaking of Gentiles in relationship with God. During the period from Ben Sira to the Mishnah, only *T. Naph.* 8:3 and 4 Ezra speak of relationship with God apart from the covenant community.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Exod. Rab.* 5:9: “How did the voice go forth? R. Tanhuna said: The word of the Lord went forth in two aspects, slaying the heathen who would not accept it, but giving life to Israel who accepted the Torah.”

Another point of contact is found in the tradition that equated wisdom with Torah, in which wisdom was offered to all nations (Sir 17:1, 7, 11–14, 17) but could only find a dwelling place in Israel (24:8, 23; cf. Bar 4:1). Moreover, wisdom, as the mediator of God’s creative activity, is widely perceptible as the ordering and revelatory principle of the character of God in creation (e.g., Prov 8:22–31). The effect of identifying Torah with wisdom is that all nations exist under Torah as they exist under the laws of creation.<sup>31</sup> They in turn must keep the commandments of Israel without being part of the covenant.

Such a background helps to explain how Paul could maintain that Gentiles, who do not live in possession of the written Torah, could do φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου. It has the further advantage of connecting the fabric of Paul’s thought to Jewish sources rather than predominantly Hellenistic categories.<sup>32</sup> It also establishes a foundation for answering the question as to whether Paul here is advocating a “natural law” for Gentiles in distinction from that of Jewish law.

There is some debate as to the referent of φύσει: does it refer to ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα or to τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν? Cranfield adduces 2:27 (ἡ ἐκ φύσεως ἀκροβυστία), Gal 2:15 (ἡμεῖς φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι καὶ οὐκ ἐξ ἐθνῶν ἀμαρτωλοί), and Eph 2:3 (ἡμεθα τέκνα φύσει ὀργῆς ὡς καὶ οἱ λοιποὶ) in support of the former option.<sup>33</sup> However, these parallels differ from Rom 2:14 syntactically. In each of the phrases cited by Cranfield, φύσις occurs within the phrase, whereas in Rom 2:14 it follows what Cranfield purports it to modify. In light of Cranfield’s admission that syntax and Pauline usage are not decisive, as well as his unlikely identification of the Gentiles in v. 14 as Gentile Christians (a position that would be strengthened if φύσει modified the preceding clause),<sup>34</sup> and Dunn’s suggestion that the syntax and balance of the clauses is better served if φύσει modifies the following clause,<sup>35</sup> it is best to see it in the latter sense. Moreover, such an understanding would accord well with the background of the verse described above.

The common meaning of φύσις is “the nature of something as the result of its natural development or condition.”<sup>36</sup> Such a meaning is evident in Rom 11:21 and 24 in Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree. In Rom 2:27 and Gal 2:15,

<sup>31</sup> P. Stuhlmacher (*Paul’s Letter to the Romans: a Commentary* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1994] 42) adduces 2 Bar. 57:2; *T. Jud.* 20:3–4; Philo, *Dec.* 87; and *Tg. Yer.* on Gen 1:7 in support of this connection. E. Harrison (*Romans* [Expositor’s Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976] 31) adduces Philo, *On Abr.* 5 and *On the Creation* 3 to this effect.

<sup>32</sup> Käsemann (*Romans* 63–65) examines whether Paul could be offering a modification on the Greek idea of νόμος ἄγραφος, by which is meant a sense of natural justice that serves as the norm for written legal codes or that, in its universal character, stands over against the arbitrary desires of political rulers. While noting that idea had previously been appropriated in Jewish contexts, both Hellenistic and Palestinian, he argues persuasively against a Pauline appropriation here.

<sup>33</sup> Cranfield, *Romans* 156–157.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 157. See especially footnote 2.

<sup>35</sup> Dunn, *Romans* 1–8 98.

<sup>36</sup> J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 1988) 1:586. Cf. *TDNT* 9:253.

Paul uses the term to delineate those who are in their essence Gentiles and Jews, respectively. The adverbial phrase *παρὰ φύσιν* occurs in Rom 1:26 and the adjectival *φυσικὴν χρῆσιν* in 1:26 and 27 in the context of sexual perversion that is not in keeping with the nature of human beings.<sup>37</sup> It is noteworthy that Paul avoids the term when discussing the knowledge of God that can be derived from the created order (1:18–25). In the light of such usage, in 2:14 the best understanding of *φύσει* is to see it against the background sketched above. To do *τὰ τοῦ νόμου* is possible only where what is knowable about God is the basis of conduct (cf. 1:19, 21; 2:15). In that Jewish thought could ascribe knowledge of and obedience to God in the absence of the written commandment, it is proper to speak of doing *τὰ τοῦ νόμου* “by nature.”

The meaning of *τὰ τοῦ νόμου* is debated as well. Barrett denies any connection with the Mosaic Law,<sup>38</sup> while Dunn understands the phrase to refer to performing the “things” of the Jewish Law.<sup>39</sup> In the context of Paul’s argument, this phrase is given further definition by such phrases as *τὸ δίκαιωμα τοῦ θεοῦ* (1:32), *καθ’ ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ* (2:7), *τῷ ἐργαζομένῳ τὸ ἀγαθόν* (2:10), *οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου* (2:12), *τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου* (2:15), *νόμον πράσσης* (2:25), *δικαιώματα τοῦ νόμου φυλάσσειν* (2:26), and *τὸν νόμον τελοῦσα* (2:27). The point here is godly obedience, a concept that is attributable to Gentiles. As shall be discussed below, *ἔργα νόμου* is not a suitable parallel.

The final clause of v. 14, *ἑαυτοῖς εἰσιν νόμος*, is the occasion of some debate as well. As many commentators note, the phrase has a parallel in Aristotle that refers to a person of superior virtue who has no need of external guidance.<sup>40</sup> Dunn argues that the phrase is best rendered “[they] are the Law for themselves.”<sup>41</sup> Here, as throughout v. 14, Paul’s point loses its poignancy if anything but the Jewish Law is in view. As Dunn points out, Paul’s point is to “undercut the assumption that Israel and the Law are coterminous.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Jewish tradition allowed for obedience to the precepts of Torah on the part of Gentiles as well as for the possibility for them to share in the eschatological blessings of Israel. Paul brings together in a succinct, vivid manner those strands of Jewish thought that allowed for such. Earlier in the passage he emphasized the equal responsibility of Jew and Gentile in terms of sin (v. 12). Here he argues that both Jew and Gentile could plausibly obey the Law. In both negative and positive terms, Paul has severed the identity of Law and Israel.

4. *Verse 15.* In v. 15, Paul spells out in greater detail the rather vague phrase *φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν*. The three clauses of v. 15 are meant to provide evidence for this assertion.<sup>43</sup> The first clause that demonstrates the

<sup>37</sup> 1:28 shows a conceptual parallel in *ποιεῖν τὰ μὴ καθήκοντα*.

<sup>38</sup> Barrett, *Romans* 51.

<sup>39</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 98–99.

<sup>40</sup> *Nic. Eth.* 1128a: 31–32.

<sup>41</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 99. This takes *ἑαυτοῖς* as a dative of advantage (cf. *BDF* Sec. 188).

<sup>42</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 99.

<sup>43</sup> So Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 105–106.

sense of Gentile moral responsibility is οἵτινες ἐνδείκνυνται τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν. Two issues need to be addressed in this clause. The first concerns the phrase τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου. As suggested above, the phrase is best grouped with similar phrases that emphasize the positive aspect of performing the precepts of the Law. The suggestion to equate the current phrase with occurrences of ἔργα νόμου, while attractive, is misguided. First of all, there exists the grammatical difference that in v. 15 ἔργον is in the singular while ἔργα is plural. While this may appear to be a superficial difference, a survey of the occurrences of ἔργα in Romans and Galatians seems to indicate that Paul may be using the term in conjunction with νόμος in a somewhat technical and negative sense in contexts where it appears to stand for a notion similar in meaning to “works righteousness.”<sup>44</sup> When the plural form is used in a positive sense, it is collocated with some designation meaning “good.”<sup>45</sup> In contrast, except in 1 Cor 5:2 and 2 Tim 4:18 where a qualifier indicates otherwise, the singular form has a positive connotation for Paul. In light of Pauline usage and the various parallel phrases in the immediate context, the present phrase should be taken as a positive assertion.

The second issue in this clause relates to the phrase γραπτὸν ἐν ταῖς καρδίαις αὐτῶν. Many commentators see here an allusion to Jer 31 (LXX 38):33 (cf. Isa 51:7). However, the key difference between the present phrase and that in Jeremiah is that here it is said that τὸ ἔργον τοῦ νόμου, not (ὁ) νόμος, is written on their hearts. What is at issue here for Paul is that the specific “requirements”<sup>46</sup> or “business”<sup>47</sup> of the Law of the Jews are known to the Gentiles and have been shown forth by them. He has already conceded the will of God has been revealed to them (1:18–21, 32). Moreover, as discussed above, Jewish tradition allowed for such a knowledge. The key here is to recognize that γραπτὸν is used in a passive sense, suggesting that the source of this moral responsibility is from God, not deduced from the general order of things.<sup>48</sup> Paul is here drawing out the implications contained in φύσει. Again, his purpose here is not to argue for “natural law,” but to “scathe the ethnic superiority and election pride of the Jews.”<sup>49</sup>

With συμμαρτυρούσης αὐτῶν τῆς συνειδήσεως, the issue of “conscience” as related to the Law enters the picture. C. Pierce’s helpful study of συνείδησις<sup>50</sup> has served to dispel the notion that Paul here has appropriated a term of Stoic origin. Rather, the term as appropriated by Paul finds its roots in popular, not philosophical, circles. In popular usage, συνείδησις generally meant

<sup>44</sup> Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16 (3x); 3:2, 5, 10. Cf. Rom 3:27.

<sup>45</sup> In Eph 2:10, ἀγαθός qualifies ἔργα, while in several passages in the Pastorals, καλός qualifies it.

<sup>46</sup> So Käsemann, *Romans* 64.

<sup>47</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 100.

<sup>48</sup> So Ridderbos, *Paul* 106–107.

<sup>49</sup> J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: the Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 80.

<sup>50</sup> C. A. Pierce, *Conscience in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1955). See especially 13–53 for detailed discussion of the background of συνείδησις and its related word group, and 132–147, “Analytical Index of Greek Sources,” for tabular arrangements of this word group in Greek (including NT) literature. Cf. *TDNT* 7:898–919.

“knowledge shared with oneself.”<sup>51</sup> The predominant sense of the term is negative, a sharing of painful knowledge with oneself at having done wrong, though less frequently the term is used to signify a positive sharing of knowledge with oneself that one is innocent. A survey of Paul’s usage of the term shows similar tendencies.<sup>52</sup> In the immediate context, the term here probably has the positive sense in view, with emphasis upon the Gentiles acting in accordance with the precepts of the Law in vv. 14–15a. This is also indicated in its collocation with *συμμαρτυρέω* (cf. 9:1). The verb means “testify,” “bear witness with,” “confirm,” or “testify in support of someone or something.”<sup>53</sup> While the lack of an object indicates that “testify” is probably the best rendering here, the important fact is that it confirms the positive sense of *συνειδήσις* in the present context. Again, Paul here does not seem to equate *συνειδήσις* with “natural law” or the Law, but rather introduces it here as evidence that Gentiles can perform in accordance with the precepts of Jewish Law.

At first sight, it might appear that *μεταξὺ ἀλλήλων τῶν λογισμῶν κατηγορούντων ἢ καὶ ἀπολογουμένων* serves to provide explanation as to how “conscience” in the preceding clause works. Yet the presence of *καὶ* joining this clause to the previous one and the parallel genitive absolute constructions in the constituent clauses indicate that it might be better to view the clauses as complementary but distinct pieces of evidence in support of v. 14. Dunn observes that the verbs *κατηγορέω* (“bring charge against, condemn”) and *ἀπολογέομαι* (“make a defense, defend oneself”) are juridical terms that anticipate the scene of judgment in v. 16.<sup>54</sup> Of special significance here is that the “conflicting”<sup>55</sup> thoughts of the Gentiles can defend them. Yet there is a “reality check” of sorts in this clause. The placement of the verbs with respect to the conjunctive *ἢ καὶ* suggests that the conflicting thoughts of the Gentiles will do more condemning than defending. This clause serves, then, to bring proper perspective to the positive assessment of Gentiles in vv. 14–15 and the negative assessment of Gentiles (1:18–32) and all humanity in general (3:9).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Louw and Nida include the term under sub-domains “Psychological Faculties” and “Know” (*Lexicon* 324 and 335, respectively).

<sup>52</sup> In the negative sense, see 1 Cor 8:7, 10, 12; 1 Tim 4:2; Titus 1:15. In the positive sense, see Rom 9:1; 2 Cor 1:12; 1 Tim 1:5, 19; 3:9; 2 Tim 1:3.

<sup>53</sup> *BAGD* 778. The choice of *συμμαρτυρέω* over *μαρτυρέω* may be motivated by the desire for intensification brought by the preposition *σύν* in compound, but it was probably chosen to complement the lexical significance of *συνειδήσις* as well as to attract to the preposition *σύν* in *συνειδήσις* (*συνειδήσις* is a derivative of the compound verb *σύννοια*).

<sup>54</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 101–102.

<sup>55</sup> *μεταξὺ ἀλλήλων* is best seen as modifying *λογισμῶν* and thus rendered idiomatically “conflicting” (Cranfield, *Romans* 162) rather than modifying *ἑθνη* and rendered “among themselves” (Watson, *Paul, Judaism* 116; H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Romans* [Winona Lake, Ind.: Alpha, 1883] 94; M. Black, *Romans* [NCB; London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1973] 58).

<sup>56</sup> This “reality check” is actually introduced at the beginning of v. 14. “Ὅταν” often takes the sense of *εἰάν* when it occurs with the subjunctive (*BAGD* 587–588), which would give the statement the sense of a third-class conditional statement (“condition of contingency”).

At this point, a word is in order concerning the temporal frame of reference of the clauses in v. 15. Do the clauses refer to activity occurring in the present or to the future judgment? Many versions introduce parentheses around all or parts of vv. 14–15 in order to delineate this frame of reference.<sup>57</sup> The position taken here is that the first refers to the present experience of humankind while the final two refer to the future. The basis of this belief is that, in the first instance, ἐνδείκνυμαι indicates that which is empirically verifiable, providing a parallel to the observable behavior identified in v. 14. The final two clauses refer to those evidences that are not directly verifiable by observation. This of itself is not sufficient to cast them into future reference, but the material parallel to judgment of τὰ κρυπτά τῶν ἀνθρώπων is suggestive in this direction. Moreover, the conjunction of the final two clauses with καί (such a conjunction is not present between the first two clauses) may suggest that these clauses are complementary and should be taken together in their temporal reference. Finally, the juridical verbs in the final clause would naturally look toward the judgment scene to follow in v. 16. The fact that the tense of the participles in these clauses is the present tense does not materially affect this view.<sup>58</sup>

5. *Verse 16.* K. Snodgrass has observed that v. 16 is the only part of chap. 2 that is specifically Christian.<sup>59</sup> It may be such a realization that has led some to see it as an interpolation.<sup>60</sup> However, as Käsemann notes, a reference to judgment is indispensable at this point if sense is to be made of vv. 12–15.<sup>61</sup> Its inclusion is entirely natural given the emphasis upon sin and judgment in 1:18–3:20. Moreover, the verse forms an inclusio with v. 12 (note the presence of κατακρίνω in both verses), keeping the judgment motif in view in this section.

The phrase ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὅτε κρίνει ὁ θεός clearly refers to the eschatological day of judgment. Such a use of ἡμέρα is well attested in Paul.<sup>62</sup> Again, the fact that κρίνω is here in the present tense does not materially alter the fact that the phrase is future-referring.

The focus of judgment is upon τὰ κρυπτά τῶν ἀνθρώπων. That God sees and judges the motivations of the heart is a feature well known in Judaism.<sup>63</sup> As suggested above, this reference forms a material parallel to v. 15b, c. It also

<sup>57</sup> The NIV encloses all of vv. 14–15 in parentheses, apparently to assign its content to present experience while connecting the pronouncement of “righteous” in v. 13 to the judgment scene of v. 16. See the punctuation apparatus in UBS<sup>3</sup> for the various options.

<sup>58</sup> From the perspective of verbal aspect theory, deictic indicators rather than the tense itself determine the temporal reference of verbs. For a discussion of this facet of aspect theory, see S. E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 75–109. In the traditional view, it is attested that the present tense can be future-referring (*BDF* Sec. 323).

<sup>59</sup> Snodgrass, “Justification” 79.

<sup>60</sup> E.g., Watson, *Paul, Judaism* 116.

<sup>61</sup> Käsemann, *Romans* 67. Without v. 16, Käsemann likens the context as a “torso without it.”

<sup>62</sup> Rom 2:5; 13:12; 1 Cor 1:8; 3:13; 5:5; 2 Cor 1:14; Phil 1:6, 10; 2:16; 1 Thess 3:10; 5:2, 4.

<sup>63</sup> 1 Sam 16:7; 1 Chr 28:9; Ps 139:1–2, 23; Jer 17:10; *Pss. Sol.* 14:8; 17:25.

parallels Paul's conception of the "true Jew" in vv. 28–29 and throughout chaps. 9–11.

It is possible to render the prepositional phrase *κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου διὰ Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ* to reflect the sense that "the assertion that there will be a judgment is in accordance with the gospel which was given to me by Christ Jesus,"<sup>64</sup> or to reflect that "this judgment will take place through Christ Jesus according to the standard which is the gospel."<sup>65</sup> Dunn argues that the difference between the views is not very substantial.<sup>66</sup> The view taken here is that the second rendering makes better sense of Paul's argumentation in this passage. By arguing that Christ will be the One through whom God's judgment occurs,<sup>67</sup> Paul is again placing his argumentation into perspective. Affirming that Christ will judge each individual, and that the standard by which they will be judged is the gospel, Paul is hinting at an answer to the question of whether some supposed natural law or even the Jewish Law is sufficient for salvation. Though greater exposition is forthcoming, Paul already clarifies that the judgment, in both its positive and negative verdicts, will be viewed from a Christian frame of reference.

#### IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Many of the questions noted at the outset of this investigation have been addressed at points in our discussion. Issues related to consistency in Paul's thought will be addressed at this stage in somewhat broad strokes. As noted earlier, many have seen in this passage some inconsistencies and/or contradictions between Paul's teaching here and statements made elsewhere regarding the nature of justification. Perhaps the genuine issue here is not one of specific statements being at odds with others, but one of methodology at the levels of Pauline, biblical, and systematic theology. It is often the strategy of such disciplines to group verses (whether singularly or in small units) under defined categories with the result being harmonization or the declaration that the statements cannot be harmonized. Such an approach may work much of the time. The contention of this paper, however, has been to argue that Rom 2:12–16 must be examined as an integral unit of the larger context of 1:18–3:20. To put the issue in perspective, we may ask ourselves how often have we seen the individual verses of 2:12–16 or the unit itself cited in theological systems, and how often have we seen a reference to 1:18–3:20.

<sup>64</sup> Harrison, *Romans* 32; Moo, *Romans 1–8* 151; J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans, 1–8* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) 77; A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949) 147.

<sup>65</sup> Meyer, *Romans* 96.

<sup>66</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1–8* 103. Stuhlmacher (*Romans* 46) adopts the view that the basis of judgment is Law as discerned in the Sinaitic code (for Jews), in the natural order and conscience (for Gentiles), and in the instruction of Christ and the Holy Spirit (for Christians), all of which is in accordance with the Christian gospel and through Christ. Cf. Murray, *Romans 1–8* 78; Black, *Romans* 58–59.

<sup>67</sup> This position is well established in early Christian thought. Cf. Matt 25:31–33; John 5:22, 27; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 1 Cor 4:5; 2 Cor 5:10; 2 Thess 1:7–10; 2 Tim 4:1; Rev 22:12.

Succinctly put, Paul's purpose in 1:18–3:20 has been to show that both Jew and Gentile stand on equal footing before God as to responsibility for sin. A significant portion of this treatment has been dedicated to demonstrating to Jews that they have no claim for special treatment due to their national/ethnic standing as the covenantal people of God. Gentiles who do not possess the Torah nevertheless at times fulfill its precepts. Jews who have received several divine privileges nonetheless at times behave as godless Gentiles. The culmination of this line of argumentation is to declare that all humankind stands in need of God's redemptive work in Christ. The persuasiveness of Paul's argumentation may be greater in some places than in others, and individual stages of it, extricated from the larger context, may appear absurd and contradictory in relation to the whole of Pauline thought, but the argument must be viewed in its entirety to grasp Paul's point.

Another way to state this may be to grant Paul the privilege of not having to bring every small statement into line with some imposed framework. This is especially important in the case of Romans. Whatever one sees as the purpose behind Paul writing to these churches, it must be acknowledged that we have no guarantee that these churches knew of Paul's doctrine of justification by faith prior to their reception of the epistle. Paul has yet to detail in Romans his understanding of justification by faith. The statement in 1:17 has stated his position in propositional form, but it stands in need of unpacking. This is precisely what Paul begins to do in 1:18–3:20. Yet this rather large section serves as a stage of an even larger argument. In short, to an audience that may not have had access to the full exposition of Paul's doctrine, 1:18–3:20 is necessary ground to cover before he outlines the positive content of his doctrine of justification by faith.