In the midst of writing my dissertation on circumcision and conversion in early Judaism and Luke-Acts, I (Matthew) suddenly wondered whether I had stumbled upon a novel interpretation of Rom 2:17–29, one of the more troublesome passages in Paul’s writings. I was in the midst of researching and writing about the fact that some Jews in the Second Temple period rejected the possibility that gentiles could become Jews through the rite of circumcision and observance of the Jewish law. In other words, there might be instances of people who were of non-Jewish descent who believed themselves to be Jews—and perhaps, were even thought to be Jews by many others Jews—whose
Jewishness was questioned by yet other Jews. Could Paul possibly have hinted at this same skepticism of a gentile convert’s Jewishness in his reference to the person who calls himself a Jew [σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ] in Rom 2:17?

I consulted the major commentaries on Romans and found no interpreter who considered this possibility. All appeared to take Paul’s words to address a Jew—the “typical Jew” or a Jewish teacher of gentiles, but a Jew, nonetheless. Fortunately, I did not stop there, even though the question was what one of my former professors calls “a rabbit hole”—a question that appears interesting but leads one away from the work one ought to be doing. Searching Duke University’s library catalogue, I stumbled onto Runar Thorsteinsson’s book devoted to the topic of Paul’s interlocutor in Romans 2. Surely Thorsteinsson would give me the definitive answer on whether anyone had ever argued that Rom 2:17 refers to a judaizing gentile. To my surprise, he made precisely this argument, and he did so in far greater detail than I could have imagined.

***

I (Rafael) was preparing a new graduate course on Paul’s letter to the Romans. I had taught Romans before, but as I worked through the text anew for the first time in a number of years, I found that I had changed my mind about a fairly significant point. Whereas I previously had taught that Paul’s interlocutor in Rom 2:1–16 was a judgmental—even hypocritical—Jew, I now found myself agreeing with those commentators who read Paul’s second-person-singular rhetoric as directed against a gentile interlocutor. I was persuaded not by any particular commentator who argued the point—though I now find Stanley Stowers’s argument very convincing indeed. Instead, I simply read the text linearly, from front to back. The movement from Romans 1 into Romans 2 clearly indicates a strong link between those

Paul describes in the earlier chapter and the interlocutor Paul addresses in the latter.

When I arrived at Rom 2:17, the moment where Paul resumes his direct address to his interlocutor (Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαίος ἐπονομάζῃ . . .), I wondered if, perhaps, Paul might still be addressing the same interlocutor he had addressed earlier in Romans 2 (ἀναπολόγητος εἶ, ὥσπερ ἀνθρώπε πάς ὁ κρίνων . . .). The difference did not seem to matter much at the time, and I was wary of offering a new reading that did not find any support—so I thought at the time—among Pauline and Romans scholars. I tentatively decided to read Rom 2:17–29 in terms of a gentile interlocutor, out of curiosity more than anything else. I did not, at that time, realize the argument already had been made. I first encountered Runar Thorsteinsson’s monograph in Robert Jewett’s comments on Paul’s rhetorical question in Rom 3:1 (Τί οὖν τὸ περισσὸν τοῦ Ἰουδαίου). Jewett dismisses Thorsteinsson’s thesis swiftly, in a footnote: “This rhetorical question [viz. Rom 3:1] renders implausible the suggestion by Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 197–231, that the interlocutor is a Gentile claiming to be a Jew.”

I quickly discovered that reading Paul’s interlocutor as a judaizing gentile—at the time, I called him a “gentile proselyte to Judaism”—bears enormous exegetical consequences for how one reads the rest of Romans. In 2012, I presented a paper at the Paul Seminar of the British New Testament Conference that sought to demonstrate how our reading of Paul’s use of νόμος might change if we follow Thorsteinsson. In the discussion after the papers, Matthew Novenson

2. Jewett, Romans, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 241n18. Jewett refers to Thorsteinsson’s monograph eight times before this reference and three more times after it. This, however, is the only reference that explicitly deals with Thorsteinsson’s specific reading of Rom 2:17–29 (as Thiessen notes, below).
3. I have since published my reading of Romans as If You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul’s Letter to the Romans (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).
informed me of Matthew Thiessen’s argument, presented at the 2011 SBL Annual Meeting, that Paul viewed gentile circumcision as itself a violation of the rite of circumcision. I contacted Thiessen after the conference, and in late September 2013, I suggested to him the possibility of co-editing a volume that highlighted and advocated for a reading of Paul’s interlocutor and of Romans as a whole that grew out of Thorsteinsson’s thesis. The present volume is the result.

***

It is now just over a decade since I (Runar) published my dissertation, Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2, in which I proposed a new reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans, especially Romans 2. As the title suggests, the focus is aimed at the person or persons to whom Paul turns in chapter two, especially in Rom 2:1–5 and 2:17–29. Paul’s use of the second-person singular (“you”) characterizes both passages, where Paul speaks to an individual whom he criticizes heavily for being inconsistent in his thought as well as behavior.

But who are these individuals, and how many of them does Paul imagine? Does Paul address a single individual throughout the chapter? Or, is there a change of interlocutors at Rom 2:17? Scholars are divided when it comes to answering these questions. Current research provides two main options. According to the first alternative, there is but one person addressed in Romans 2: an ethnic Jew. According to the second alternative, there are two kinds of persons in the chapter: a gentile, or, more generally, a “human being” in 2:1–5 (and in 2:1–16, more broadly), and a Jew in 2:17–29.

alternative—that Paul’s dialogue is with a Jew throughout the chapter—is more common than the second and is endorsed by a long tradition of interpretation. According to this tradition, Romans 2 contains Paul’s fiercest attack against Jews and Judaism. Few, however, realize that the tradition of reading a Jewish interlocutor in Rom 2:1–5 is a relatively recent phenomenon, perhaps because this tradition, despite being recent, has been so widely held. In contrast to recent interpreters, Origen (d. 254), as one example, does not even mention such a reading in his commentary on Paul’s letter.9

A significant point in all of this is the identity of the persons described in the preceding passage, Rom 1:18–32.10 Romans 2 begins with the word διό ("therefore"). Even if διό is a small word, it is of great importance for the identification of the interlocutor in 2:1–5. The use of διό means that Rom 2:1 offers an inference drawn from the preceding verses. When Paul says to his interlocutor: “Therefore you are without excuse,” the reason for the person being without excuse is found in the preceding text. Διό implies that the reason is already given.

We can present in tabular form the two alternatives for reading Paul’s interlocutor in Romans 2 that we have already described, including how Paul’s interlocutor relates to the persons described in Rom 1:18–32:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1:18–32</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>2:1–5</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>→</th>
<th>2:17–29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>gentiles (primarily) Jews</td>
<td>←</td>
<td>a Jew</td>
<td>←</td>
<td>a Jew</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>gentiles/humanity</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>a gentile/human being</td>
<td>≠</td>
<td>a Jew</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Earlier attempts to identify Paul’s interlocutor(s) in Romans 2.

The point of departure for the first model is that the interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 is a Jew (cf. 2:17: “But if you call yourself a Jew . . .”). Since the person addressed in 2:1–5 appears to be the same as in 2:17, this person, it is claimed, must also be a Jew. Most of those who follow

---

9. Similarly, see John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans, Homily 6 (NPNF1 11:368).
10. For discussion of Rom 1:18–32, see Magnus Zetterholm’s chapter in the present volume.
this reading argue that the persons described in 1:18–32 are primarily gentiles. However, because of Paul’s use of διό in 2:1, commentators often infer that Paul must also be describing (at least some) Jews in Rom 1:18–32.\textsuperscript{11}

The second model approaches the text in an entirely different manner. The point of departure is now found in Rom 1:18–32. The persons who are described there are either gentiles or human beings in general (including Jews). Paul’s use of διό, among other things, suggests that the interlocutor should be either a gentile or a “human being.”\textsuperscript{12} Since, however, the person addressed in Rom 2:17–29 is a Jew, there is a shift of interlocutors at 2:17.

The main weakness of the first model is that interpreters read the text back-to-front: from the Jew in 2:17 backward to a Jew in 2:1, and then, mostly because of διό in 2:1, back to the persons described in 1:18–32, among whom, one now has to place (at least some) Jews. Those who argue for the second model argue that this is a misguided and misleading approach to the problem. One should rather read the text linearly, that is to say, from the beginning forward. That seems to be a fair claim. Texts are usually read linearly, especially epistolary texts. But those who advocate the latter model have, nevertheless, been unsuccessful in explaining the relationship between the interlocutors in 2:1–5 and 2:17–29. There is, in fact, much in the text that suggests that the interlocutors in 2:1–5 and 2:17–29 are one and the same.

Is there a third solution to the problem? Yes, there is another way to read the text—a way which demands that one poses an important, but neglected question: is one so certain that Paul’s interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 is a Jew?


12. Jewett, for example, rightly gives διό its “full logical sense,” but then argues, “The reduction of the conjunction to a nonlogical transition rests on a misperception of 1:18–32 as pertaining only to Gentiles, whereas it includes ‘all impiety and unrighteousness of humans who by unrighteousness are suppressing the truth’ (1:18);” see Jewett, Romans, 196. Jewett, therefore, finds himself confirmed in his earlier judgment, that “the formulation with ‘all’ [in Rom 1:18] indicates that Paul wishes to insinuate that Jews as well as Romans, Greeks, and barbarians are being held responsible” (ibid., 152; emphasis added).
As I (Matthew) said above, I was surprised to discover that someone had already argued, in considerable detail, that Paul’s interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 was a judaizing gentile. Despite the fact that the book was some seven years old when I first came across it, it had caused little more than a blip, as far as I could tell, in the secondary literature on Romans and, more generally, on Paul. That situation continues to persist today—thirteen years after its publication. For instance, Jewett’s magisterial Hermeneia commentary on Romans mentions Thorsteinsson’s monograph a number of times, but only once in relation to his treatment of Rom 2:17–29.13 Douglas A. Campbell’s lengthy monograph on justification theory in Paul deals extensively with the interlocutor and diatribe of Romans 1–4, yet refers to Thorsteinsson’s book just once—and this, merely in passing, despite the potential relevance of Thorsteinsson’s claims for the central thesis of Campbell’s work on the diatribe in Romans.14 Finally, N. T. Wright’s two-volume treatment of Paul’s theology does not once refer to this work—again, despite the implications it might have for Wright’s reading of Paul.15

To be sure, the secondary literature on Paul’s writings is, frankly put, too voluminous for any one scholar to take account of, and so, the observation that these particular scholars do not obviously reckon with Runar’s novel thesis is not meant to criticize them for what they have not read or adequately addressed in secondary scholarship. Even so, in spite of the considerable size of Jewett’s commentary and the monographs of Campbell and Wright (all three works total over four thousand pages), only one sentence is devoted to even mentioning

13. Jewett (Romans, 241n18) dismisses Thorsteinsson’s thesis about Rom 2:17–29 on the sole basis of Paul’s rhetorical question in Rom 3:1: “What, then, is the advantage of being a Jew?” As Joshua D. Garroway’s chapter in the present volume demonstrates, though, this precise question and its larger context support Thorsteinsson’s interpretation.
Runar’s central thesis about the identity of Paul’s interlocutor. This neglect is representative of the larger field. To my knowledge, only a few scholars have written reviews of Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2—most importantly, Stanley K. Stowers, the doyen of, among other things, scholarship on the diatribe in Paul’s letter to the Romans.  

Whatever the reason for the silence surrounding Thorsteinsson’s book, in 2011, I felt that North American scholarship, in particular, needed to hear this particular thesis anew. So, I presented my own reading of Rom 2:17–29, based heavily on Thorsteinsson’s thesis, at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco. The presentation of that paper resulted in the discovery of a few more like-minded interpreters of Paul, including Rafael Rodríguez, who was, at that time, completing a monograph on Romans that also took its cue from Thorsteinsson. In the early autumn of 2013, Rafael pitched the idea of co-editing a volume that would build upon and expand Thorsteinsson’s work. It seemed audacious—would we be able to find enough people who both knew Thorsteinsson’s work and agreed with it? The answer, as you can see, is yes. While the essays in this volume do not follow him at every point, his overall argument functions as the foundation upon which all these essays rest. Before turning to the contents of the present edited volume, it will be necessary to outline Thorsteinsson’s main arguments.

The Argument of Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2

Thorsteinsson begins his volume by situating Paul’s letter to the Romans within the context of ancient letter writing. He argues that ancient letters followed certain basic conventions and that such

17. Now published as Thiessen, “Paul’s Argument.”
18. See Rodríguez, If You Call Yourself a Jew.
19. The remainder of this introductory chapter avoids the first-person authorial voices used thus far.
conventions enabled readers of letters to understand the author’s intentions. He believes one must start with the whole of Romans before one can properly understand the function of the various parts of the letter, including Rom 2:17–29. Thorsteinsson calls this a “top-down” approach to the text, which moves from the whole to the parts. When he refers to the “whole,” he has in mind aspects such as the epistolary structure of Romans, the literary character of the letter, the situation in which the letter was written, and the relationship between the letter’s sender and recipients. Thorsteinsson uses his first chapter to address two issues in particular: the epistolary structure of Romans, in which he briefly describes the epistolary opening, body, and closing; and the epistolary setting of Romans, in which he describes the relationship between the type of letter Romans is and the specific setting in which it was written.

In his investigation of specific epistolary features in Romans, which he compares to a great number of ancient letters of various kinds, Thorsteinsson concludes that Paul’s choice and use of well-known epistolary formulations have their closest parallels in official correspondence, such as diplomatic, royal, and administrative letters. Paul’s way of expressing himself through standard epistolary formulations suggests a hierarchical relationship between the apostle and his audience, a relationship that is determined by Paul’s mission to proclaim God’s good news to gentiles. The content of Romans is actually grounded in Paul’s relationship to his audience: the letter is, in effect, Paul’s proclamation of the good news. Everything suggests that the letter was written to a particular, contemporary group of people in Rome. There is, therefore, no good reason to doubt that the letter was written precisely to the people who are identified in the letter as its recipients.

Thorsteinsson stresses that, while there are similarities between ancient letters and speeches, one must be careful not to blithely equate the two. He suggests that Artemon, the editor of Aristotle’s letters, who believed that “a letter ought to be written in the same manner as a dialogue [διάλογον],” has partially led modern interpreters astray. In
order to give balance to Artemon’s sentiments, he notes that at some point between the third and first centuries BCE Demetrius stressed the differences between these two modes of communication. Thorsteinsson concludes, “letters from Greco-Roman antiquity should be taken for what they are, viz., letters, and, as a point of departure, they should be analyzed with respect to prevailing epistolary practices” and not solely in light of rhetorical conventions of speech.  

At the same time, he acknowledges that ancient epistolary theorists paid little attention to establishing clear norms, leaving a great degree of flexibility in order to meet the variegated demands of letter writing. In fact, the structure of letters was relatively basic, consisting of an opening, a body, and a closing. Only the opening was obligatory, identifying the sender in the nominative case, the recipient in the dative, and usually conveying some sort of salutation: “A (nom.) to B (dat.), greeting [χαίρειν]” (for example, Pseudo-Libanius, Ep. Char. 51). To these required components of an opening, letter writers often attached both health wishes and prayers. The second common component of a letter—the body—dealt with the reason the sender wrote the letter, although this section is less stereotyped than either the opening or closing. Finally, the third common component of a letter—the closing—conventionally included a farewell wish and could also include a health wish, a secondary greeting, and an autograph.

Thorsteinsson criticizes claims that Paul has uniquely expanded upon this threefold structure of Greco-Roman letters. For instance, William G. Doty insists that Paul developed a fivefold structure, adding a thanksgiving or blessing after the opening and a paraenetic section after the body. Thorsteinsson, however, argues that Doty’s suggestion falls apart when one observes that only three of Paul’s letters—Romans, Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians—contain a section

20. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 17 (original emphases).
after the body that might be classified as paraenetic. Further, neither Galatians nor 2 Corinthians contains material that one might call a thanksgiving section. Thorsteinsson concludes, “Unless well informed of a distinctive Pauline way of writing four- or five-part letters, no first century audience of his would have expected anything else from him but a regular three-part letter.”

Thorsteinsson, therefore, analyzes the letter of Romans in light of the conventional tripartite nature of Greco-Roman letters. He argues that the opening, Rom 1:1–7, while containing conventional information, such as sender (v. 1) and recipients (v. 7), is so unique in its length that it would have caught the attention of its audience, who “would have paid special attention to the information provided in this initial section of the letter.” The length of the opening is due, in part, to the numerous epithets Paul uses to describe himself, a list considerably more expansive than in any of his other letter openings. These epithets, Thorsteinsson argues, would have established his authority with his readership, showing “that Paul himself was deeply concerned with pointing out his authoritative status for this particular audience.” Further, the material contained in Rom 1:2–6 extends the conventional opening and defines the gospel that Paul preaches—again, an element entirely lacking in the openings of Paul’s other letters: “Apart from being a formal presentation of God’s ‘good news,’ the extension functions as an additional specification not only of the sender but of the recipients as well, and as a thorough explanation of the relationship between these two parties.”

The identification of the recipients, while formally appearing in Rom 1:7 (“all God’s beloved in Rome”), already takes place in Rom 1:5–6 in a manner that connects Paul’s authority as missionary to the gentiles to his composition of this letter to those gentiles who dwell in Rome.

Another aspect of Romans that is an epistolary convention is the use of beseeching language [παρακαλέω] in Rom 12:1–2: “Therefore, I

25. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 30.
26. Ibid., 31.
beseech you, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as living sacrifices, sacred and acceptable to God, which is your rationale worship. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of the mind so that you will approve what is God’s will—that which is good, acceptable, and perfect.” Remark ing on the centrality of this sort of request as the motivating factor in the composition of numerous ancient letters, Thorsteinsson concludes:

Due, first, to the central position and function of request formulas in ancient letters in general, many of which have requests as their sole or main occasion and purpose, second, to the central role played by the request formula in Romans 12:1–2, which not only has the preceding discourse in its entirety as its basis, but also functions properly as a summary of the subsequent one, and third, to the unmistakable change of form occurring at this point in the text, the hortatory request in 12:1–2 constitutes the structural center of Paul’s letter.29

Paul’s expression of confidence that his readers in Rome would do as he asks (15:14) is connected to this request in Rom 12:1–2.

Finally, while scholars dispute whether Romans 16 was originally part of Paul’s letter,30 Thorsteinsson argues that such lengthy second-person greetings “in which the sender asks the recipient(s) to deliver greetings to someone for him or her” are quite common in Greco-Roman letters.31 In fact, this series of second-person greetings serves an important function in a letter that introduces Paul and his gospel to people who do not know him personally: “Paul’s primary concern was to ensure the acceptance of the εὐαγγέλιον among his Roman audience by making evident the extent and nature of his relationship with a large group of people (including Phoebe), by whom the letter’s message and Paul’s status could be supported.”32

29. Ibid., 53–54.
32. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 65.
On the basis of the scattered evidence of epistolary formulae in Romans, Thorsteinsson concludes that Romans was a real letter, not a rhetorical speech set within an epistolary framework, one that fits with letters written in a normative setting. In other words, Romans was intended for a specific audience and dealt with a specific, contemporary issue.

This last point—that Romans was written within a normative setting—suggests to Thorsteinsson that Paul intended to address a specific issue or set of issues facing a specific audience. The question of Paul’s audience is, for Thorsteinsson, of utmost importance, for it is crucial for the reading of the letter as a whole. Pauline scholars, however, continue to debate the ethnic composition of Paul’s audience. Most argue—or take it for granted—that Paul’s letter was written to a mixed group of “gentile Christians” and “Jewish Christians,” with the former in the majority. The scholarly discussion has largely revolved around reconstructions of the historical situation in Rome and the ethnic composition of Roman “Christianity” early in Nero’s reign.33 The problem, however, is that we know very little about the origins and development of the Jesus movement in Rome prior to Paul’s letter. Thorsteinsson, therefore, distinguishes between two questions: the ethnic composition of Christ-believing movements in Rome, on one hand, and the ethnic composition of Paul’s intended audience, on the other. The answer to this latter question should be sought in the letter itself, not outside of it.34

Contrary to a few interpreters, who believe that Paul intended to address a primarily Jewish audience,35 and to the majority of interpreters, who believe that Paul intended to address an audience

consisting of both Jews and gentiles,\textsuperscript{36} Thorsteinsson, together with an increasing number of scholars, argues that it is unnecessary to presume that Jews (or “Jewish Christians”) are among Paul’s \textit{intended} audience.\textsuperscript{37} To begin with, the letter is formally addressed to people of gentile origin, and on several occasions, Paul explicitly refers to his audience as gentiles, and only as gentiles (1:5–7, 13–15; 11:13; 15:15–16). Second, even implicit references to the audience (for example, 4:1; 7:1; 15:7) neither exclude the gentile audience nor entail a Jewish one. The fact that Paul seems to presume the audience’s knowledge of Jewish law and customs does not require a Jewish component among the audience Paul intends to address. It simply means that Paul’s gentile audience associated to some degree with Jewish communities in Rome. In short, regardless of the actual ethnic makeup of Jesus believers living in Rome in the first century CE, Romans was written to people of gentile origin. These are not just any gentiles, but gentiles who are relatively familiar with—and attracted to—Jewish customs.

Thorsteinsson also addresses weaknesses in the majority reconstruction of Paul’s intended audience, explicitly discussing a number of pieces of evidence that commentators believe prove that the intended audience was ethnically mixed. First, numerous interpreters understand Paul’s language of the “weak” and the “strong” in Romans 14–15 to refer to law-observant Jewish believers and law-free gentile believers (and Jewish believers, such as Paul, who stopped observing the Jewish law), respectively.\textsuperscript{38} Yet, nothing in the text requires this identification. Non-Jews in the Greco-Roman world also dealt with issues of vegetarianism and observing holy days. For that matter, it is possible, as A. Andrew Das has argued, to conclude that the weak are, in fact, gentiles who are judaizing, while the strong are gentiles who refuse to judaize.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} Basically, all modern commentators.
Second, some scholars point to the greetings in Romans 16 as evidence that Paul believed that some Jewish believers in Jesus would be in the audience. For instance, E. P. Sanders points to the Jewish names in Romans 16, and concludes, “Romans is unique in the Pauline correspondence in containing so many clues to the presence of Jewish Christians among the readership.”

Similarly, Richard B. Hays believes that Romans 16 contains “some of the strongest evidence for the mixed Jewish-gentile composition of the Christian community at Rome.” But, as Thorsteinsson points out, these remarks confuse first-person greetings with second-person greetings. Only the former greeting speaks to the identity of the intended audience. Consequently, while Paul mentions a number of Jewish believers in Jesus here, the fact that he asks his intended readers to greet them suggests that he believes (rightly or wrongly) that they would not be among the initial audience when the letter was read corporately.

Finally—and this point is significant—Thorsteinsson stresses that his argument pertains only to Paul’s intentions. Whom did Paul intend to address when he wrote and sent his letter to Rome? Again, this issue of intention differs from the question of the actual, empirical makeup of the community of believers in Jesus in Rome. While modern scholars cannot know with any certainty the ethnic makeup of those first empirical readers of Paul’s letter to Rome, numerous references within the letter help identify Paul’s intended audience as gentiles, as we have already mentioned. First, Paul asserts at the very beginning of his letter that his mission is to bring about the obedience of faith among the gentiles, among whom you [the intended readers] belong (Rom 1:5–7).

Further, Paul identifies his intended readers as gentiles (1:13–15) in his claim that he wants to come to you [the intended readers] in order to

reap a harvest among you [the intended readers] just as he has and wants to do among the rest of the gentiles—people, whether Greek or barbarian, wise or foolish, to whom Paul believes himself obligated.\(^44\) In the body of his letter, Paul discusses the failure of ethnic Israel (whom he describes as his brothers, according to the flesh [Rom. 9:3]) to believe in Jesus Christ (Romans 9–11). His explanation for this stunning turn of events is that God has temporarily hardened them so that the gospel might go to the gentiles. This claim leads Paul to warn his readers against arrogance—if God can harden Paul’s fellow Jews, surely gentiles should be careful! In the midst of this discussion, Paul directly addresses his readers: “But to you gentiles, I say . . .” (11:13), noting again that he is the apostle to the gentiles. Consequently, Romans 9–11 provides further evidence that Paul’s intended addressees are identified as gentiles. While some have suggested that Rom 11:13 indicates that Paul has turned from addressing Jewish readers to addressing gentile readers,\(^45\) nothing preceding Rom 11:13 directly addresses Jews. Rather, Paul’s discussion repeatedly refers to Jews in the third person.\(^46\) In fact, as Johannes Munck noted some years ago, in Rom 11:1, Paul does not point to Jewish people in his audience as evidence that God has not abandoned ethnic Israel; rather, he needs to point to himself as proof of this assertion. This again suggests that Paul’s intended audience is exclusively gentile.\(^47\) Finally, Paul acknowledges in Rom 15:15–16 that he has written quite boldly to his readers in Rome, but defends this boldness by pointing yet again to his apostolic commission to the gentiles. Paul can write with such confidence to people he does not know personally and to a community that he did not establish because he believes that he is writing to a group of gentile believers—people over whom he has been given authority.

---


\(^{47}\) Munck, Paul and the Salvation of Mankind, 28n3.
But if Paul intends to address a gentile audience, how can we explain the fact that Romans is replete with Jewish themes? For instance, the letter contains unexplained references to Jesus’s messiahship and descent from David (1:3–4; 15:12), discussions of the patriarch Abraham (Romans 4), numerous references to the Jewish law, and a discussion of Israel’s unbelief (Romans 9–11). Paul appears to believe that his intended audience is both interested in and knowledgeable of the Jewish law—perhaps even wondering how much or in what way it applies to them now (Rom 7:1). This, however, is not to say that Paul intended his letter for an audience that included both ethnic Jews and non-Jews.

This identification of Paul’s intended audience, using the explicit evidence of the letter to the Romans rather than being misled by the question of the ethnic makeup of followers of Christ living in Rome, has considerable implications for the question of Paul’s interlocutor in the letter (Romans 2–11), which Thorsteinsson takes up in chapter 3. Thorsteinsson focuses on Paul’s use of a dialogical style in Romans. The style is introduced with a direct address in the second-person singular in Romans 2 and is followed in Romans 3 onward with a series of questions and answers. This style characterizes large parts of the text until Romans 12, at which point, the series of questions and answers disappears. This evidence of a dialogical style in the letter requires careful positioning within Greco-Roman thinking on dialogues, particularly those dialogues that occur within letters.  

Central to properly understanding any dialogue or diatribe is accurately identifying the interlocutor with whom a speaker or writer engages. Yet, it is precisely here that the diatribe presents inherent difficulties, for usually built into the style is what Stowers refers to as “a calculated duality or ambiguity” with regard to the identity of the interlocutor. Consequently, for a diatribe to work well, Thorsteinsson

---


49. Stowers, Diatribe, 110.
argues, a speaker or writer must embed at least some commonalities between the interlocutor and the intended audience.\textsuperscript{50}

When it comes to the more specific question of trying to identify a fictitious interlocutor in a letter such as Romans, it is more helpful to turn to analogous features in literature of the same genre—namely, letters. Contrary to Stowers, Thorsteinsson believes that one must distinguish diatribes within a classroom, on the one hand, and fictitious dialogues in speech or letters, on the other. The only extant letters containing diatribes come from Seneca and Plutarch; therefore, Thorsteinsson argues that these letters are the most relevant for identifying Paul’s interlocutor.

In his investigation of interlocutors in ancient letters, Thorsteinsson observes a general principle by which one can identify the interlocutor in question: Unless otherwise indicated, the epistolary interlocutor represents or speaks for the letter’s recipient(s). Put differently, the audience was expected to identify themselves with the fictitious interlocutor. This should in no way come as a surprise, if we consider the ancient idea of epistolary communication as a written dialogue with absent persons as if they were present. Another principle follows from the first: interlocutors tend to be the same throughout a given text, unless otherwise indicated.

Letters frequently contained rhetorical questions and exchanges of questions and answers. That letters would contain dialogues is to be expected, given the oft-voiced sentiment that letters were surrogates for face-to-face conversations and dialogues (for example, Demetrius, \textit{Eloc.} 223; Cicero, \textit{Epistle} 3.8–9; Seneca, \textit{Moral Epistle} 75.1; Julius Victor, \textit{Rhet.} 27; Gregory of Nazianzus, \textit{Epistle} 51.4; Pseudo-Libanius, \textit{Ep. Char.} 2). But a letter writer could also move from including dialogical elements within a letter to a more developed dialogue containing an epistolary interlocutor. Thorsteinsson details examples of such epistolary interlocutors in the letters of Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, Pliny, Quintilian, and Suetonius, concluding that their words are often presented implicitly “not by a verb of saying,” but through an

\textsuperscript{50} Thorsteinsson, \textit{Paul’s Interlocutor}, 128.
“interrogative phrase such as τί οὖν, quid ergo, etc.” or “adversative or inferential conjunctions.”

The function of the epistolary interlocutor, among other things, is to enable the writer “to respond in advance to potential objections to what is being uttered in the letter.” The interlocutor’s “interruptions” give voice to the potential thoughts of the intended audience. The audience must, consequently, identify itself in some way with the epistolary interlocutor: “Unlike many of the ‘diatribe’ texts, however, a general, verifiable, norm may be discerned in this respect. As a rule, the epistolary interlocutor represents and/or speaks for the letter’s recipient(s).” While he believes that this rule applies to Romans, Thorsteinsson acknowledges that these examples differ slightly from Romans in that they always address a single reader, unlike Romans, which addresses a community.

Examining Paul’s letter to the Romans, Thorsteinsson begins by noting that Paul initiates a dialogue in Rom. 2:1, directly addressing someone in the second-person singular: Διὸ ἀναπολόγητος εἶ, ὃ ἀνθρώπος πᾶς ὁ κρίνων. This second-person address continues throughout Romans 2 and into chapters 3–11, chapters that contain scattered questions and answers. At Rom 12:1–2, Paul moves from such questions and answers to imperatival language—using beseeching language to address his intended readers more directly. He cites further evidence of dialogical language: the second-person singular (9:19; 11:19) and first-person singular (10:18–19; 11:1, 11) verbs of saying, the numerous occurrences of the interrogative phrase τί οὖν (3:1, 9; 4:1; 6:1, 15; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 19, 30; 11:7); the adversative conjunction ἀλλά (for example, 3:7, 27; 9:32), as well as strong negations to posed questions, especially μὴ γένοιτο (3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11). This evidence suggests to Thorsteinsson that Paul engages in a dialogue

51. Ibid., 137–38.
52. Ibid., 140.
53. Ibid., 141.
54. Ibid., 143.
55. More complicated are the first-person plural verbs of saying found in Rom 3:5; 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 30.
56. For an impressive graphic display, see Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 146.
with a fictional interlocutor throughout Romans 2–11. Moreover, formal factors in the dialogues of Romans suggest that the interlocutor is the same throughout Romans 3–11, even though this can, at times, be very difficult to determine, especially when Paul uses the first-person plural, “we,” in such a dialogue. This means that the identity of Paul’s interlocutor is established already in Romans 2, where the apostle addresses the interlocutor directly in the second-person singular before moving to the dialogue proper.

To summarize: the letter to the Romans is addressed to people in Rome who are of gentile origin and are, therefore, subject to Paul’s apostolic authority as “an apostle to the gentiles” (Rom 11:13). The letter itself proclaims and explains God’s “good news” to this group of people. Large parts of the letter are characterized by a dialogical style, suitable for such a pedagogical purpose. When the dialogical style of the diatribe was used in ancient letters, the letter’s interlocutor was normally formed as a fictitious representative for the letter’s audience. This fictitious representation, in fact, turns out to be one of the central features of our generic classification of Romans as an epistolary diatribe: Paul, as author, expects his audience to identify with this fictitious partner in dialogue. With these general aspects in mind, we can return to Romans 2.

In the fourth and final chapter, Thorsteinsson brings together his work on Greco-Roman epistolary theory, epistolary interlocutors, and the identification of Paul’s intended audience to articulate a general theory for reading Romans: whoever this interlocutor is, he should, according to Greco-Roman conventions, represent—in some way—Paul’s intended audience. “In principle, Paul’s interlocutor(s) in Romans is representative of the letter’s gentile audience and the one(s) with whom the audience should identify.”

Before he tests this theory against the content of Romans 2, which employs dialogical language and features, Thorsteinsson begins in Rom 1:18–32. As noted above, he urges a linear reading of

57. In this, Thorsteinsson disagrees with Stowers (Rereading of Romans, 249), who believes that the dialogue ends by Romans 5.
58. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 152.
Rom 1:18–2:29, that is to say, a reading from beginning to end. In other words: (1:1–17 →) 1:18–32 → 2:1–5 (→ 2:6–16) → 2:17–29. In this case, we begin with 1:18–32. Who are the persons spoken of in the passage? A number of scholars have shown that Paul’s critique in 1:18–32 should be read as a typical Jewish polemic against non-Jews, a polemic we find in a number of Jewish writings, including the Wisdom of Solomon. Paul is not referring to all of humanity in these verses; he is referring to everyone except Jews. When he speaks about “humans” [ἄνθρωποι] in Rom 1:18, he is not referring to all human beings; he describes precisely those human beings who are spoken of in the following text. According to Paul, these human beings have no excuse for not having worshipped God properly, even if they only had knowledge of God through his creation. And since they failed to worship God, God handed them over not only to a reprobate mindset, but also, to all kinds of sinful and humiliating ways of life—a typical ancient Jewish description of the gentile world.

Arguments that Paul includes Jews within at least parts of his rhetoric are very weak. Such arguments seem primarily rooted in a backward reading of the text from 2:17, which creates some pressure to find Jews in Paul’s description in Rom 1:18–32. Paul, however, describes the gentile world in 1:18–32, and the numerous third-person references suggest that Paul does not intend to indict all of humanity in the sins he catalogues there. Further, the references to homoerotic behavior in Rom 1:24–27 were, from a Jewish perspective, actions that only gentiles were involved in (see Let. Aris. 152; Sib. Or. 3.596–600). Finally, Paul’s earliest extant readers unanimously agree in identifying the people condemned in Rom 1:18–32 with gentiles only. Moreover,

60. See Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 169–72, and Magnus Zetterholm’s essay in the present volume.
61. Frank Matera (Romans, ΠΙΛΑΕΙΑ Commentaries on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010], 50) finds allusions to Deut 4:15–19 and Ps 105:20 LXX in Rom 1:22–23 and so concludes that Jews as well as gentiles “foolishly preferred what is mortal and corruptible to the one who alone is immortal and thus incorruptible.”
there are no signs in the text that its critique comes from someone other than Paul himself.\textsuperscript{64} On the contrary, Paul himself seems to share this understanding of the gentile world (cf. Gal 2:15; 1 Cor 5:1; see also Eph 2:11–12). Paul’s proclamation of the “good news” begins, therefore, with the “bad news,” a reminder of the ethnic background that still affects Paul’s readers’ status before God. Paul wants to remind them of their status as gentiles.\textsuperscript{65}

This bleak description of the gentile condition leads into Paul’s statements in Rom 2:1–5, an important passage for Thorsteinsson’s argument. Paul begins this passage with the inferential conjunction διό, “therefore,” clearly drawing a conclusion from the preceding verses.\textsuperscript{66} Since Paul has been describing gentiles immediately prior to 2:1–5, διό presumably draws a conclusion that relates to gentiles rather than to Jews, despite the conclusion of the majority of interpreters.\textsuperscript{67} The person who judges those described in Rom 1:18–32 is no better off than they are, precisely because he, too, is a gentile, and thus, suffers from what one might call the “gentile condition.” Confirmation for this reading of Rom 2:1–5 can be found in the fact that Paul discusses God’s forbearance [ἀνοχή] for the interlocutor, a forbearance that Paul connects to God’s passing over of gentile sin until Christ in Rom 3:25–26.\textsuperscript{68}

We should not let the later, stereotypical image of the “hypocritical Pharisee” fool us as we read Romans 2.\textsuperscript{69} There are no evident signs whatsoever that Paul’s interlocutor is a Jew. Neither should we be
misled by the fact that Paul addresses the interlocutor as “man” [ἄνθρωπε] in Rom 2:1, 3. This word does not mean that Paul is pointing his accusation at all “human beings” [ἄνθρωποι]. The word ἄνθρωπε was a very common mode of address in dialogues of this sort (for example, in Epictetus), and it has the same meaning as “mister,” “sir,” “fellow,” and the like.⁷⁰

Paul poses a question in Rom 2:3: “Do you honestly believe that you will escape the judgment of God?” For some reason, the interlocutor is of the opinion that he enjoys a better status than other gentiles and that he is, therefore, in a position to judge them. Paul does not state in this passage precisely why the interlocutor might think he has a better position. But that Paul is addressing a person of gentile origin is strongly suggested by a series of possible allusions to Jewish texts that are critical toward gentiles.⁷¹ These texts discuss not only God’s wrath against the gentile world but also God’s patience toward gentiles and the need for them to repent. Paul makes use of this Jewish tradition in order to substantiate his argument that the interlocutor’s position is no better than that of other gentiles. According to Paul, this will be shown on the day of wrath and judgment, when God will pay each and every one according to their deeds.

Thorsteinsson continues his linear reading of Romans 2 and asks: is it possible that the person addressed in 2:17 is the same as in 2:1–5? He focuses on correspondences between Rom 2:1–5 and 2:17–29, particularly the fact that both passages deal with an interlocutor who judges others but who falls short himself. Two links bridge Rom 2:1–5 and 2:17–29. First, the accusations put forth in these passages are more or less the same. The greatest difference is that the accusations are somewhat more detailed in Rom 2:17–29 and focus on transgressions of the Jewish law (especially circumcision; see 2:25–29). This difference, however, is quite natural and, in fact, expected in light of what is emphasized in the passage between 2:1–5 and 2:17. In verses 6–16, which discuss the fact that God will repay every person according to

---

⁷⁰ See especially, Stowers, Diatribe, 85–93.
⁷¹ In his discussion of ἀνοχή/ἀνέχειν, Stowers (Rereading of Romans, 105–6; 344n76) refers to 2 Macc 6:12–16; Wis 11:23; 12:2, 10.
their deeds, the main emphasis is that every person should follow the law (see esp. Rom 2:13–15). The accusations in 2:17–22 are then expressed on the basis of this perspective and are, therefore, of a more definite character. Second, structural markers in Rom 2:6–16 suggest that these verses are subordinated to 2:1–5, which in turn means that the dialogue with the interlocutor is still in sight when we come to 2:17. When Paul says “But if you . . .” [Εἰ δὲ σὺ . . .] in Rom 2:17, he poses a question on the basis of what was added to the discussion in 2:6–16.

If Thorsteinsson correctly interprets the connections between Rom 2:1–5 and 2:17–29, then it is more likely that the interlocutor of Rom 2:17–29 is the same as the interlocutor of Rom 2:1–5 and is, therefore, a gentile. Further, this identification of the interlocutor as a gentile who either has judaized or is considering judaizing fits well with Paul’s intended audience—a group of gentile Christ followers living in Rome who are knowledgeable of the law and perhaps are open to judaizing (Rom 7:1). “Paul is engaged in a fictitious dialogue with a gentile who claims or aims to be a Jew, something which Paul rigorously opposes.”  

This interlocutor, then, believes himself to be both superior to and distinct from the pagan gentiles of Rom 1:18–32. He believes that by adopting the Jewish law, he has become a Jew and therefore no longer fits the description of the idolatrous and immoral gentile. He now boasts of the one true God, Israel’s God, and knows his will and approves of what is excellent. His conversion to Judaism has also led him, as is common among converts, to proselytize those who remain in the gentile condition. Who better to preach to them than one who used to be just like them before being given sight and light and knowledge in the law?

The gentile identity of the interlocutor in Rom 2:1–5 has consequences for the interpretation of Rom 2:17–29. The vast majority of scholarship agrees with Dunn in concluding that in “vv 17–24 the identity of the interlocutor becomes explicit: a (typical) Jew whose views Paul knew ‘from inside’.” Thorsteinsson, however, points to

72. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 209.
73. Dunn, Romans 1–8, 108.
the emphatic construction of Rom 2:17, σὺ Ἰουδαίος ἐπωνομάζῃ, and concludes, “it is far more likely that the emphasis put on σὺ, shown by its redundancy, is meant to point back to the σὐ in 2:1–5 (see esp. the emphatic σὐ in v. 3) in order to signal that the direct address to this same person is now resumed.”74 In other words, if the interlocutor of Rom 2:1–5 is a gentile, then so too must the interlocutor be a gentile in Rom 2:17–29.

To be sure, Paul here uses the term Ἰουδαίος in reference to his interlocutor. The interlocutor calls himself a Jew, but this does not mean that Paul accepts his claim. “What is important to note is that Paul does not say that the person addressed is a Ἰουδαίος.”75 Origen makes this point in his interpretation of Rom 2:17: “But now let us see what the Apostle says to him who is called a Jew. First of all it must be observed that he has not said of him, ‘But if you are a Jew,’ but rather, ‘if you call yourself a Jew.’ This is because to be a Jew and to be called a Jew are not the same thing” (Commentary on Romans 2.11.4). Similarly, John Chrysostom states, “For he does not say, Behold, thou art a Jew, but ‘art called’ so” (Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans, Homily 6 [NPNF1 11:368]). Admittedly, neither Origen nor Chrysostom concludes that Paul addresses a judaizing gentile; instead, they—along with virtually every interpreter since their day—conclude that Paul redefines who is a Jew: not a person who is genealogically descended from Jews, but someone who believes in Jesus. Interpreters since Origen have almost universally assumed that Paul identifies Christians with the “true Jews.” Consequently, they have understood Paul’s reservation about his interlocutor’s claim to be a Jew as evidence that Paul thinks that genealogical descent from Abraham does not, in itself, make one a Jew. One needs to act like a Jew; otherwise, one’s Jewishness is undone. In other words, there is a difference between name [ὄνομα] and deed [ἐργον].76

Thorsteinsson, unlike this tradition of interpretation, takes Paul seriously here. The person calling himself a Jew is not genealogically

74. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 163.
75. Ibid., 198.
Jewish. He is, instead, someone of gentile descent who has adopted Jewish customs and now calls himself a Jew. Thorsteinsson situates this proposal in relation to the important work of Shaye J. D. Cohen, who emphasizes how Jewishness developed in the Second Temple period from a strictly “ethnic” definition (by which Cohen refers to genealogical descent) to an “ethno-religious” definition, in which observance of customs and laws enabled those who were not genealogically Jewish to become Jews.77 Nonetheless, Jews in this same period evidence some tensions with regard to the status of gentiles who adopted Jewish customs.78 King Herod serves as a conspicuous example, being an Idumean whose family had, under Hasmonean pressure, adopted Jewish customs. While some Jews thought that Herod was Jewish, others viewed his ethnicity with suspicion, referring to him as a half-Jew (cf. Josephus, Ant. 14.403).79

Thorsteinsson understands Rom 2:17–29 within the context of this Second Temple debate over whether judaizing gentiles should be considered “Jews.” The judaizing gentile interlocutor of Romans 2 calls himself a Jew [σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ]. He also relies upon the law and boasts in God. Despite scholarly attempts to read these statements negatively, it is clear that Paul thinks that boasting in God, at least, is a perfectly legitimate thing to do (see Rom 5:11; 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17). Additionally, this person believes that he knows God’s will and approves of what is excellent precisely because he is instructed in the law. Here, too, Paul surely does not condemn his readers for being instructed in the law or striving to know God’s will. In Rom 7:1, he commends his readers for knowing the law (see also Gal 4:21), and in

Rom 12:1–2, Paul provides instructions to his readers as to how they might approve the will of God.

Beyond this person’s self-perception, Paul depicts him as believing himself to be a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, and a teacher of children—again, precisely because he has the law (2:19–20). As Thorsteinsson says, “the phrases used by Paul in vv. 17–20 do not by themselves have negative values. However, as recognized by many interpreters, Paul’s address as a whole in these verses is characterized by a certain sense of irony.”

This latter language, as scholars note, is stereotypical of Jewish missionizing thinking, leading Stowers, for instance, to conclude that the interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 is not a typical Jew, but a Jewish missionary who preaches that gentiles must adopt the Jewish law in order to find freedom from the existence within idolatry and immorality described in Rom 1:18–32. The irony, however, is that the interlocutor is no Jew (according to Paul), and has, therefore, no claim to the missionary obligation that Paul and other Jews have among non-Jews.

Paul accuses the interlocutor of hypocrisy, committing the precise sins against which he preaches: theft, adultery, and sacrilege (2:21–22). Again, these verses do not fit a Jewish interlocutor. Does Paul really think that all Jews are guilty of theft, adultery, and sacrilege? If he only believes some Jews to be guilty of it, how would this fact undermine Jewish election and law observance, let alone justify a total redefinition of Jewish identity? As Thorsteinsson notes, scholars have encountered significant problems explaining why Paul would accuse Jews of “robbing temples” [ἱεροσυλεῖς] in Rom 2:22. Some have even stated that this verse must be among the most perplexing passages found in Paul’s letters. If, however, we read the verse as a historical reference to the gentiles’ repeated attempts to plunder the temple in Jerusalem, the strangeness of the passage diminishes considerably.

80. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 208.
82. See further, Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 213–18.
precise explanation of Paul’s rhetorical questions in Rom 2:21–22. Thorsteinsson argues that they work better if one understands them as addressing a judaizing gentile. Even here, though, Thorsteinsson acknowledges that he has “some doubts about the rhetorical effect of such a charge [against gentiles], but it seems to me that the reading proposed here makes more sense than those in which Paul’s target is presumed to be a Jew.”

Reading the interlocutor as a judaizing gentile also makes better sense of Paul’s use of Isa 52:5 in Rom 2:24: “The name of God is blasphemed amongst the gentiles because of you.” As Richard B. Hays notes, within the context of Deutero-Isaiah, the accusation of Isa 52:5 is leveled at gentile nations who have oppressed Israel. For Paul to use this accusation against a Jewish interlocutor, then, is “not only a low blow but also . . . a stunning misreading of the text.” For that matter, if Paul wants to accuse Jewish misbehavior for causing the gentiles to blaspheme God, he has other, better-fitting texts from Jewish scriptures. Why did Paul not choose to cite some of the texts in which Jews are directly criticized for dishonoring God’s name (for example, Ezekiel 36) if he wished to accuse a Jewish interlocutor? The answer: the interlocutor is not a Jew at all, and Paul’s choice of text is, therefore, quite natural. Thorsteinsson’s identification of the interlocutor as a gentile explains Paul’s selection of Isa 52:5: the gentile’s judaizing behavior leads his fellow gentiles to blaspheme God.

Paul takes up the rite of circumcision explicitly in Rom 2:25–29. Again, most interpreters take these verses as Paul’s attack on Jewish privilege and distinctively Jewish practices such as circumcision. According to this reading, Paul argues that circumcision is only of value if one follows the entirety of the Jewish law. If not, then one’s circumcision is rendered meaningless. Such a reading, of course, creates quite some tension with Rom 3:1–2, where Paul claims that

83. See Matthew Thiessen’s chapter in the present volume.
84. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 218.
86. See further Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 218–21.
there is great benefit to circumcision, and Rom 9:1–5, where Paul expresses his belief that his fellow Jews, even those who do not believe in Jesus, continue to have significant benefits. If Paul undermines Jewish privilege in Romans 2, he subsequently rebuilds it in Rom 3:1–5 and Romans 9–11. Consequently, we see here again that identifying the interlocutor with a gentile, and relating Paul’s statements about circumcision in Rom 2:25–29 to gentile circumcision and judaizing, makes better sense of Paul’s letter.

Paul argues that gentiles do not have to be circumcised in order to have a chance on the Day of Judgment. According to Paul, it was never God’s intention that gentiles would avoid his wrath through circumcision, that is to say, by becoming Jews. There is another way for them. On the Day of Judgment they can be counted as circumcised, if they are circumcised in their hearts and do what the law requires of them. In this way, Paul calls the interlocutor’s position into question. Here, it becomes evident why he thought that he was in a position to judge other gentiles—even teach them—and why he had believed that he would escape the judgment of God (cf. 2:1–5). The interlocutor was sure about his position as a proselyte, as a physically circumcised person. In v. 27, Paul shows what really is the case: other gentiles (Christ believers) who do what the law requires of them, in spite of the fact that they are “physically uncircumcised,” will judge him who transgresses the law, in spite of his literal, physical circumcision.

Paul’s emphasis on circumcision makes a good deal of sense if he addresses a judaizing gentile because it was this rite in particular that was thought to turn a gentile into a Jewish proselyte. Paul, in contrast, believes that this judaizing gentile’s circumcision is of no value; it does not transfer him out of the realm of the gentile world described in Rom 1:18–32 into the Jewish world of God’s election and

promises. According to Paul, the judaizing gentile’s circumcision is as good as uncircumcision. As Thorsteinsson concludes,

The function of Paul’s conversation partner in Romans 2 is interwoven with his identity. The interlocutor invented by Paul is a person of gentile origin who fails to recognize that his ethnic roots put him in ranks with the people described in 1:18–32 whose existence is still affected by the divine punishment once imposed upon them. Instead of coming to terms with this state of affairs, he thinks that he can bypass God’s own will by becoming a proselyte.89

By creating a fictitious interlocutor—one with whom the audience is expected to identify—Paul sets out to persuade his readers that their path to salvation is not through circumcision. He has in his sights all those among his readers who think and possibly act as the interlocutor does, which includes not only those who already are proselytes, but also—and perhaps, more importantly—potential proselytes.

We can represent this linear reading of Rom 1:18–2:29 graphically:

\[
1:18-32 \rightarrow \rightarrow 2:1-5 \rightarrow \rightarrow \rightarrow 2:17-29
\]

\[
gentiles \rightarrow \text{a gentile (by birth)} \rightarrow \text{a gentile (by birth)}
\]

Table 2. The identification of Paul’s interlocutor in Romans 2 on the basis of a linear reading of the letter.

Jews in the first century CE debated whether gentiles could or should become Jews, that is to say, proselytes, and whether proselytes enjoyed the same status as ethnic Jews.90 The apostle Paul was engaged in a related debate with respect to the question of Christ (see especially, Galatians). It should, therefore, come as no surprise to meet a (potential) proselyte in a letter such as Romans, a letter that contains Paul’s proclamation and explanation of God’s “good news,” a letter that is addressed to ethnic gentiles to whom Paul had not yet proclaimed the good news. It should not surprise us either if, in chapter 2, Paul

89. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 232–33.
creates a proselyte whom he accuses in order to persuade his gentile audience, whether they are proselytes or not, that the proper path for them is not to try to become Ἰουδαῖοι.

The Contents of The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans

Thorsteinsson’s work on Romans, and on Rom 2:17–29 in particular, is exciting for a number of reasons. First, it provides a novel reading of what must surely be the most commented-upon writing in Christian thinking. It is no small task to offer a novel reading of a work that has been written on so extensively!

But, more than novelty, Thorsteinsson’s argument excites because it supports a paradigm shift in how one reads Paul in relation to Judaism. Paul’s thinking has often been viewed as anti-Jewish—not least due to passages such as Rom 2:17–29, where he supposedly redefines Jewishness in such a way as to deny the name to those descended from Abraham through Jacob and his sons in order to give it to gentiles. In the process, Paul obviates all meaning from the rite of circumcision, and the entire Jewish law by extension. Thorsteinsson’s argument opens up the possibility of reading Rom 2:17–29 without the supersessionist and anti-Jewish conclusions commentators have traditionally drawn from this passage. Paul does not depict Jews as hypocritical thieves, adulterers, and temple robbers. Nor does he dismiss the Jewish law in its entirety as impossible to keep and therefore of no use. Finally, Paul does not redefine who is a Jew, so that ethnic Jews are Jews no longer and Christ-believing gentiles are.

These are all real and significant theological dividends for those for whom Paul’s writings are scripture. For that matter, these results are also ecumenical advances—breaking down one more obstacle in the admirable efforts to create better relations between Jews and Christians. All of this from one oft-neglected and historically attentive book!

For these reasons and more, the editors decided to do whatever we could to advance Thorsteinsson’s work. We believe his argument provides a historically more accurate reading as well as a theologically
more attractive account of Paul’s thinking. This volume represents our efforts to organize a group of scholars around this task, showing the ways in which Thorsteinsson’s thesis leads to new and better readings of other portions of Romans.

The enterprise of Pauline scholarship is quickly nearing its fourth decade of scholarship in light of E. P. Sanders’s seminal reconfiguration of ancient Judaism in terms of “covenantal nomism.” The so-called “New Perspective on Paul,” however, has continued to bear the marks of normative theology and construed Paul against a Judaism that constitutes a dark background to emerging Christianity. Magnus Zetterholm builds on Thorsteinsson’s hypothesis of a judaizing gentile interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 (and throughout Romans 2–11) in order to highlight Paul’s position “within Judaism” and to bring to the fore Paul’s concern for and preoccupation with the situation of non-Jewish followers of Jesus. In this light, Paul’s rhetoric in Rom 1:18–32 comes into clearer focus as a description of the nations, the non-Jewish peoples whom Jews already had a tradition of critiquing as foolish idol-worshippers who cannot be excused for their ignorance (Wis 13:9). Such a reading avoids the universalizing of Paul’s rhetoric by both traditional (for example, C. E. B. Cranfield) and New Perspective scholars (for example, James D. G. Dunn). Nothing in Romans 1 actually suggests Paul is addressing the “human plight” of Adam’s legacy or lumping Jews in with non-Jews for their aberrant worship and ethical conduct; now, thanks to Thorsteinsson’s argument, we see more clearly that nothing in Romans 2 draws ethnic Jews into Paul’s critique.

Matthew Thiessen’s essay situates Jewish debates over gentile judaizing within both Second Temple period thinking and larger Greco-Roman discussions over Greek and Roman identity. It is clear that the construction of identity—Greek, Roman, and Jewish—was a particularly fraught issue at the time. While he agrees with Thorsteinsson’s thesis that Paul’s interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 is a judaizing gentile, he provides a different reading of Rom 2:21–22. Thorsteinsson argues that Paul intends the rhetorical questions of these verses to address the judaizing gentile, to show that he still
belongs to the immoral gentile world he condemns. As we noted above, Thorsteinsson acknowledges that he continues to harbor “some doubts about the rhetorical effect of such a charge [against gentiles],” but concludes “that the reading proposed here makes more sense than those in which Paul’s target is presumed to be a Jew.”

Thiessen suggests that, according to Paul, the very act of judaizing, the very adoption of the Jewish law, makes the gentile interlocutor guilty of theft, adultery, and sacrilege.

One potential problem arises from Thorsteinsson’s reading: if Paul deals with a gentile interlocutor throughout Romans 2, then how can he claim in Rom 3:9 that he has already charged [προηγιασάμεθα] both Jews and gentiles as being “under sin.” Joshua Garroway addresses this issue, contending that Rom 3:9a, and more broadly, Rom 3:1–20, makes better sense when we construe Paul’s interlocutor as a gentile. The nearly unanimous view that the interlocutor is a Jew makes Rom 3:9a difficult to interpret without doing violence to either its grammar or its context. The verb προηγιασάμεθα is most naturally rendered in the passive voice (“are we excelled?”), but the supposition that a Jewish interlocutor asks this question creates tensions with Rom 3:1–8, in which Paul clearly claims that Jews excel gentiles. Paul’s negative response then complicates Rom 3:9, in which he indicates that the catena put forth in Rom 3:10b–18 is intended to abase Jews in particular. In order to accommodate the context, the majority of interpreters have rendered προηγιασάμεθα as an active verb despite the absence of such usage elsewhere. Placing προηγιασάμεθα in the mouth of a gentile accounts for both the grammar and the context felicitously. Having learned in Rom 3:1–8 that being Jewish has its advantage—indeed, much in every way—the gentile interlocutor wonders whether he should conclude that gentiles are excelled by Jews. Paul defends his negative response, “not at all,” by demonstrating that Jews, like gentiles, have been indicted by God, so that both are in need of the redemption afforded by Christ’s death and resurrection.

While Stowers argues that the diatribe with the interlocutor

91. Thorsteinsson, Paul’s Interlocutor, 218.
disappears at the end of Romans 4, Thorsteinsson contends that it continues to Romans 11. Taking up this claim, Rafael Rodríguez traces the function of Paul’s use of first- and second-person rhetoric in Romans 5–8. A close reading of the verbs and pronouns in these chapters will show how Paul uses the first-person plural to circumscribe himself (a Jewish writer) and his gentile audience within the same rhetorical space. On the other hand, Paul uses the second-person plural to differentiate himself, rhetorically, from his audience. The concentration of first-person singular rhetoric in Romans 7 functions within this scheme; here, Paul steps within the sphere of his audience (7:4–6) and speaks in the voice of his judaizing gentile interlocutor (7:7–25). (The only second-person singular form in Romans 5–8 occurs in 7:7, in a quotation from the Decalogue.) Paul uses first- and second-person forms to express the heart of his gospel: the gentiles have been adopted into the family of Israel’s God, and this “apart from Torah.”

Thorsteinsson’s work on Romans 2 fits broadly within what some scholars refer to as the radical new perspective on Paul—a line of argumentation that can be found, most prominently, in the works of Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, Stanley Stowers, Caroline Johnson Hodge, and Pamela Eisenbaum. These scholars are most famous (or infamous) for varied claims that Paul held to a two-track salvation: one for gentiles, which required Christ, and one for Jews, which did not require Christ. One might interpret Thorsteinsson’s work as belonging to this stream of scholarship because he does not discuss the question of Jewish people in relation to Paul and his gospel. Matthew V. Novenson,


93. See Terence L. Donaldson, “Jewish Christianity, Israel’s Stumbling and the Sonderweg Reading of Paul,” JSNT 29 (2006): 27–54. That this description is not true of all these interpreters can be seen, for instance, in Stowers (Rereading of Romans, 36): “Paul immediately announces (1:16–17) his confidence that the news about Christ and his faithfulness provides the key to understanding God’s plan for dealing justly and successfully with both Jews and Greeks” (see similar remarks on pp. 132, 307, 364n5).
however, reexamines Romans 9–11 in light of what Paul says about Jews and gentiles in Romans 2. He notes and discusses the salient differences between Paul’s rhetorical address to a “self-styled Jew” in Rom 2:17–19 and his lament on behalf of his actual Jewish kinfolk in Romans 9–11. Historically, these two passages have often been read alongside one another under the rubric of “Paul’s indictment of Judaism,” but there are good reasons for questioning this line of interpretation. Novenson argues that if we want to understand Paul’s assessment of the religion of his non-Christian Jewish kinfolk, we must look to Romans 9–11. There, tellingly, Paul’s point is not that his fellow Jews take a perverse pride in their ancestral law, but that, just to the extent that they stumble over the apostolic announcement of the messiah (Rom 9:32–33), they mistake the Torah for a means of conferring eschatological righteousness (Rom 10:3). In Paul’s moral calculus, the self-styled Jew of Rom 2:17–29 is liable to the charge of boastfulness, whereas the actual Jews of Romans 9–11 are liable to the very different charge of zeal without knowledge.

Finally, Michele Murray shows how Romans 2 is but one example among several other strands of Christian anti-Jewish rhetoric that criticized the phenomenon of gentile judaizers—specifically, gentiles who combined a commitment to Christ with adherence in varying degrees to Jewish practices without viewing such behavior as contradictory. She notes evidence of this gentile judaizing in other letters of Paul, such as Galatians and Philippians. Moving outside of Paul, she sees both the Epistle of Barnabas and the Didache also protesting against judaizing by gentile believers in Christ.

In the final essay, Joshua Jipp provides an appreciative response to the central thesis of this volume and offers “three critical and largely sympathetic observations that . . . may continue the conversation.”

First, he finds Thorsteinsson’s reading of Paul’s interlocutor as a judaizing gentile helpful for highlighting Paul’s engagement of two solutions to “the gentile problem,” one that enjoins Torah observance

on gentile converts and one that does not. Jipp highlights three passages—Rom 2:17–29; 7:7–25; and 16:17–20—that support the hypothesis that Paul is concerned about addressing an alternative missionary program that threatens to draw gentile converts away from Paul’s gospel. He also finds Thorsteinsson’s hypothesis helpful for understanding Paul’s dialogue about Abrahamic descent with the interlocutor in Rom 3:27–4:25. Second, Jipp identifies Thorsteinsson’s hypothesis, along with Benjamin L. White’s recent book, Remembering Paul, helpful for reopening the question of the relationship between the portrayal of Paul in the Acts of the Apostles, on the one hand, and the Paul of the letters (especially the Hauptbriefe), on the other.

Jipp broadens the scope of his view to identify four points of contact between the “Paul within Judaism” approach to Paul and the Paul of Acts: (1) Paul stresses his own continuing fidelity to Torah and his Jewish heritage; (2) the “gentile problem” is one of non-Jewish identity; (3) the gentile problem is not solved by enjoining Torah observance (including circumcision) for gentile converts; only the unprecedented outpouring of the πνεῦμα upon the gentiles is sufficient; and (4) the “hope of Israel” refers to the resurrection of the dead, and especially, the resurrection of Israel’s Messiah. Jipp’s third observation is the most critical of the three; he calls for increased dialogue between scholars of the “Paul within Judaism” persuasion and those whose work falls within the “Apocalyptic Paul” camp. Here, Jipp largely agrees with claims made in this volume about Paul’s approach to the gentile problem, but he wonders whether the line between the gentile and Jewish problems has been too starkly drawn. Bringing together the strengths of these two analytical approaches—Paul within Judaism and the Apocalyptic Paul—would, in Jipp’s estimation, help address the weaknesses of each. This point is crucial for scholars of Paul at a time when the critical study of Paul has become deeply fragmented.

95. For a recent treatment of “the gentile problem” in Paul, see Matthew Thiessen, Paul and the Gentile Problem (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).
The idea for the present volume began to take shape in late 2013, ten years after the initial publication of Runar Thorsteinsson’s thesis. Since 2003, a handful of students of Paul—most of whom are included here—have glimpsed in Thorsteinsson’s thesis potential for advancing the historical and theological discussion of Romans and of Paul, a Jew from the Second Temple period whose writings preserve some of the most important evidence for Diaspora Judaism in the early Roman era. This reading of Romans not only reframes the identity of “the historical Paul” in relation to his Jewish heritage, it also offers resources for contemporary discussions between Jews and Christians, both of whom continue to wrestle with the man from Tarsus and his legacy.

The chapters included here focus especially on Romans in its historical (including theological and rhetorical) context; our hope, however, is that this volume would advance the discussion of Paul both as a historical figure and as a figure in relation to Jewish-Christian relations. The recovery of the so-called Jew in Paul’s letter to the Romans highlights especially the ways “the apostle to the gentiles” engages a judaizing gentile, one who “calls himself a Jew” and who teaches other gentiles to do likewise. Moreover, the recognition of Paul’s engagement with this so-called Jew recasts some of his comments about Jews, Judaism, the law of Moses, circumcision, and other facets of Jewish life and faith and culture, comments that have been read as his repudiation of his Jewish heritage. These comments may now be read, instead, consistently with Paul’s view that the Jew does, in fact, enjoy some kind of advantage vis-à-vis the gentile (e.g., Rom 3:1–2), even as he feels himself obligated toward and sent to the gentiles (e.g., Rom 1:14; 11:13). If the present volume provokes further discussion along these lines, we will consider it a success.