

Article

Paul's Jewish Prophetic Critique of Jews in Romans

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Abstract: The article examines Paul's critique of Jews in Romans, focusing on Romans 1–3. It adopts an approach of reading Paul within Judaism while differing from some interpreters representative of this approach by arguing that Paul is critiquing his fellow Jews and that his critique is relevant to his gentile audience. It argues against the traditional Protestant problematization of "works righteousness", Sanders' claim that Paul reasons from solution to plight, and the New Perspective's problematization of ethnic distinctiveness. Paul's critique is grounded in Jewish intramural prophetic critique and restoration eschatology, over against Torah-wisdom traditions. Consistent with this perspective, Paul's fundamental criticism of Jews and Israel is their failure to keep the divine Torah. Central to Paul's argument is the interplay between Jewish particularity and the universal scope of Paul's gospel. Israel's failure is an intermediate but not an ultimate divine purpose. Jewish distinctiveness and Torah reveal the seriousness of sin and affirm the justice of God's wrath. Thus, Paul's prophetic critique also implies a prophetic hope for Israel, intertwined with his critique of and hope for all humanity, whom he views as sinners standing under God's judgment and needing salvation through faith in the Davidic messiah, Jesus.

Keywords: Israel; Judaism; New Perspective on Paul; Paul and the law; Paul within Judaism; Pauline theology; prophetic critique; restoration eschatology; Romans 1–3; Paul's epistle to the Romans

1. Introduction: What Did Paul Find Wrong with Judaism?

"At the risk of oversimplifying, we may say that, historically, Protestants have needed the idea of Jews and Judaism in order to know what we, Protestants and Protestantism, are". (Novenson 2022a, p. 183)

The idea that Judaism as a religion provides a foil for Paul's gospel has been pervasive in the history of interpretation of Paul's letters. For older Protestant interpreters, Paul's fundamental problem with Judaism was its promotion of *works-righteousness*, i.e., "man's intention of becoming righteous before God by keeping the Law" (Bultmann 1952, 1.266–67 quoting 267), which is "the human sin *par excellence*" because it is fundamentally opposed to the cross of Christ (Ridderbos [1966] 1975, p. 142 emphasis original). Sanders (1977) challenged the widespread view that Judaism was a religion of works-righteousness, yet still regarded Paul as fundamentally opposed to Judaism because it offered a way of salvation apart from Christ. Paul's logic runs "from solution to plight" (p. 443), from the existence of a savior to the need for salvation; hence, "In short, *this is what Paul finds wrong in Judaism: it is not Christianity*" (p. 552 emphasis original). Subsequent "New Perspective" interpreters, dissatisfied by the arbitrariness of this assessment (Dunn 1988, p. lxvi), regarded Paul's problem with Judaism as centered on *Jewish ethnic particularity*. For Wright, Paul in Romans regards Israel as "guilty of a kind of meta-sin, the attempt to



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confine grace to one race”, which is the “idolatry of national privilege” (Wright 1991, p. 240; cf. Dunn 1988, pp. lxxiii–lxxii; 2005, p. 105).¹

More recently, an interpretative stance has arisen that challenges the idea that Paul was against Judaism at all, instead seeking to read “Paul within Judaism” (PWJ) (Nanos 2015). Here, Paul retains his Jewish ethno-religious identity and continues to affirm Jewish distinctiveness vis-à-vis the nations. PWJ interpreters often argue that Paul has little to say by way of direct critique of Jews. Instead, Paul’s primary concern is to advocate for the proper place of gentiles—as gentiles—in the eschatological community centered on the Jewish messiah, Jesus. Paul’s conflict with fellow Jews arises not from a fundamental critique of Judaism but from Paul’s distinct view of gentile participation in the eschaton and his consequent missionary strategy (Fredriksen 2017, pp. 61–130; 2022, pp. 369–78; Runesson 2021; cf. Stowers 1994). Therefore, the PWJ perspective is often (though not always) associated with readings of Romans that argue that Paul does not discuss any significant problems concerning Jews or their relationship to Torah; instead, he is writing only to gentile believers in Jesus and addressing their (distinct) relationship to Torah (Rodríguez 2014, 2024; Fredriksen 2017, pp. 155–64; Thiessen 2016, pp. 43–71; Novenson 2022c, pp. 96–109; Campbell 2023; cf. Thorsteinsson 2003).

The PWJ perspective represents a significant step forward in understanding the meaning of Paul’s letters within his first-century context. This article, too, adopts a strategy of reading Paul within Judaism. However, the PWJ readings of Romans outlined above do not account for every feature of the letter. For example, even if Paul’s intended audience is exclusively gentile, he nevertheless conveys to these gentiles his profound grief over the prospect that his fellow Jews might not be saved (9:1–3; 10:1) and devotes considerable space to discussing its resolution (chs. 9–11). He describes the present and future of Israel and the nations not as unfolding independently from one another but as symbiotically intertwined (11:11–32). Since Paul regards issues surrounding his fellow Jews’ plight and place within God’s purposes as deeply relevant to gentile believers, these issues cannot be excluded a priori from being part of the core subject matter of the letter (cf. Öhler 2021, p. 219).

Furthermore, the strategy of reading Paul within Judaism can result in interpretations that portray Paul as far more favorable to his fellow Jews than the Jewish Scriptures are to Israel (Sloan 2023, p. 559 n. 146). Contrast, for example, Deuteronomy’s emphasis on the curse, slavery, and death that comes to Israel through their projected sinful disobedience to the Torah (Deut 27:13–26; 28:15–68; cf. Ezek 5:5–6:7) with Fredriksen’s insistence that “Every negative thing that Paul says about Jewish law, thus, he says first of all with respect to non-Jews. The law was a curse *for gentiles*. The law registered sin *for gentiles*. The law brought slavery and death *for gentiles*” (Fredriksen 2022, p. 377 emphasis original; cf. Thiessen 2016, p. 106).

2. A Way Forward: Prophetic Critique and Restoration Eschatology

A starting point for moving forward in the discussion is to recognize that reading Paul within Judaism does not necessarily entail assuming that Paul was uncritical of Jews (Sloan 2023, p. 564). Jewish intramural critique was common in Paul’s Jewish context, especially among more prophetically oriented groups (Sloan 2023, pp. 529–33). Prophetic critique was particularly prevalent among Jewish groups who emphasized Davidic, messianic hopes against existing hegemonies in Jerusalem (Athas 2023, pp. 6–9, 18–22, 53–54, 426–29, 611–14). Such messianically informed Jewish prophetic critique appears in various places in Paul’s letters (e.g., 1 Thess 2:14–16) and is particularly apposite regarding Romans. Paul appeals prominently to “the prophets” and “prophetic writings” at the beginning and end of the letter as primary scriptural support for his messianic gospel (1:2; 16:26;² cf. 3:21). Throughout Romans, Paul frequently quotes from and alludes to prophetic texts

(Crisler 2021, pp. 32–48), both to undergird his critique of Israel (e.g., 10:21) (Evans 1999) and to express his eschatological hopes and expectations for Israel (e.g., 11:25–27).

Recently, several interpreters have highlighted the value of reading Romans in light of Jewish prophetic critique and eschatological expectation. Sloan (2023) has demonstrated that Paul's denunciation of his Jewish addressee in Rom 2–4 "places Paul within a common Second Temple stream that viewed the contemporary generation of God's covenant people as still enduring the temporary punishment promised by God through Moses due to Israel's transgression of the Law, a plight which Paul claims is relieved through Christ and the Spirit" (p. 564). Young (2024) has highlighted the extent to which Paul's critique is grounded in prophetic texts, arguing that Paul is therefore operating with a Jewish "eschatological myth of Israel's sin" (p. 240). Staples (2024) has argued at length that Paul is operating within a common Jewish prophetic framework that Staples labels "Israelite restoration eschatology" (p. 59). According to this framework, Israel's past and present disobedience to the Torah has placed them under covenantal curses, but God has promised to restore them to life. The controversial elements of Paul's view are not his critique of Israel for disobedience to the Torah (which was commonplace) but rather his "claim that the eschatological hopes of Israel were already being fulfilled through Jesus, who had been declared Lord and messiah upon his own resurrection" and his "application of these promises to uncircumcised non-Jews" (p. 106).

This article aims to apply these insights to Paul's argument concerning Jews and Israel in Romans through the lens of two specific questions: (1) *What did Paul find wrong with Jews and Israel?* and (2) *How is this relevant to his gentile audience?* This is not the same as asking what Paul found wrong with "Judaism." On the contrary, this article will present a reading of Paul firmly *within* Judaism.³ However, it will do so by paying particular attention to Paul's reliance on the prophetic critique and restoration eschatology that characterized much of his Jewish milieu.

To anticipate the argument and conclusion: Paul's first and fundamental critique of his fellow Jews—and Israel more broadly, whom they represent—is not works-righteousness (contra Bultmann), nor mere failure to be Christians (contra Sanders), nor national privilege (contra Dunn and Wright). Instead, it is *failure to keep the divine Torah*. For Paul, grasping this prophetic critique of Israel enables him also to grasp the prophetic hope for Israel. Paul's critique of and hope for Jews and Israel is intricately intertwined with his critique of and hope for all human beings, whom he sees as sinners standing under God's judgment and in need of salvation through faith in the Davidic messiah, Jesus.

3. "To the Jew First": A Particularist Priority in a Universalist Gospel

Before examining Paul's critique, it is necessary to outline a key feature of the broader framework in which he sets his discussion: Jewish priority within God's universal purposes. At the start of the letter, Paul establishes that the gospel he preaches to gentile believers is not independent of Jews; on the contrary, his universal gospel has a Jewish core.

In the letter opening (1:1–17), Paul describes the gospel he preaches using concepts that are both highly "particularist" and highly "universalist."⁴ On the one hand, Paul introduces the gospel he preaches in markedly Jewish terms. It was "formerly promised" (προεπηγγείλατο) through Jewish prophetic writings (1:2; cf. 15:4; 16:26) and it concerns the Jewish Davidic messiah (1:3; cf. 9:5a; 15:12) whose messianic designation occurred through the Jewish eschatological expectation of resurrection (1:4) (Fredriksen 2017, pp. 141–45). Nevertheless, this Jewish messiah is also the universal Lord for whose glory and name Paul strives to bring about "the obedience of faith among all the nations (ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν)" (1:5; cf. 9:5b; 15:15–21). The same pattern of Jewish priority within a universal scope for the gospel appears in the thematic statement in 1:16, where Paul

declares that his gospel is “the power of God for salvation for all those who believe, for Jew first yet also for Greek (Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι)” (1:16).

This particular-to-universal paradigm established in the letter opening pervades Paul’s use of Jewish ethnic terminology throughout Romans. Admittedly, there are certain important respects in which Paul negates the value of Jewish distinctiveness: “there is no favoritism” (οὐ . . . ἐστὶν προσωποληψία) with respect to divine judgment (2:11) and “there is no difference” (οὐ . . . ἐστὶν διαστολή) with respect to sin and justification by faith (3:22; 10:12; cf. 3:9, 29–30; 4:10–16). However, this does not mean that Paul negates Jewish distinctiveness and priority in every respect. This can be demonstrated through a brief survey of Paul’s grammar of Jewish distinctiveness in Romans and its connection to the universal scope of his gospel.

Paul’s core ethnic terms are “Jew”/“Judean” (Ἰουδαῖος) (9x in chs. 1–3; 9:24; 10:12),⁵ “circumcision” (περιτομή) (6x in 2:25–29; 2x in ch. 3; 6x in 4:9–12; 15:8), which is an embodied sign of Torah-observance that operates as metonymy for “Jew” (Dibley 2021, pp. 8–9; Runesson 2022, p. 198),⁶ and “Israel(ite)” (Ἰσραήλ/Ἰσραηλίτης) (13x in chs. 9–11), which evokes participation in the broader scope of God’s “people” (λαός) (9:25–26; 10:21–11:2; 15:10) from their scriptural past through to their eschatological future (Staples 2024, pp. 37–67; cf. Staples 2021). Paul also highlights significant Jewish ancestors, especially Abraham (7x in ch. 4; 9:7; 11:1) but also Isaac (9:7, 10), Jacob (9:13; 11:26) and Benjamin (11:1), or more generally the “[fore]father[s]” (πατήρ/προπάτωρ) (7x in ch. 4; 9:5, 10; 11:28; 15:8).

Paul particularly highlights the possession of and interaction with the divine Torah as a feature of Jewish identity. Jews are collectively “the hearers of Torah” (οἱ ἀκροαταὶ νόμου) (2:13; cf. 2 Cor 3:15) by contrast with “gentiles, those not having Torah” (ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα) (2:14). Paul also describes Jews as “those in [the sphere of] the Torah” (τοῖς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ) (3:19; cf. 2:12) and “those from [the] Torah” (οἱ ἐκ νόμου/τῶ ἐκ τοῦ νόμου) (4:14, 16). Paul thus uses formulations typically denoting kinship and ethnicity (cf. Johnson Hodge 2007, pp. 79–91) to depict Jews not simply as those who happen to participate in activities relating to the Torah but as those whose very identity is formed by the Torah (Tucker 2018, pp. 85–114). For Paul, this is a divine privilege: Jews “were entrusted with the oracles of God” (ἐπιστεύθησαν τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ) (3:2).

While Paul affirms Jewish distinctiveness, he does not treat it as a reality independent of gentiles. Paul frequently describes privileges that belong *first* to Jews being shared *also* with gentile believers in the messiah—without thereby rendering Jewish priority obsolete. While the Davidic messiah comes “from” (ἐκ) Jews “according to the flesh” (κατὰ σάρκα) (9:5a; cf. 1:3; 15:12a) (Fredriksen 2017, p. 136), he is nevertheless the messiah “over all” (ἐπὶ πάντων) (9:5b; cf. 1:5–6; 15:12b).⁷ Similarly, while Abraham is the forefather of Jews “according to the flesh” (κατὰ σάρκα) (4:1; cf. 9:5; 11:1), his fatherhood is extended to gentiles through faith (4:11–18) (Campbell 2020, pp. 150–51; Ehrensperger 2019a, pp. 238–45). While God’s “people” (λαός) Israel in the eschaton is alongside (not identical to) the “nations” (ἔθνη) (15:10), nevertheless God has also called his “people” (λαός) “from [the] nations” (ἐξ ἔθνων) (9:24–26) (Staples 2024, pp. 201–9).⁸ While the privileges of enjoying God’s presence—“the adoption and the glory and the covenants and the lawgiving and the worship and the promises” (9:4)⁹—belong first to Paul’s “kinsfolk according to the flesh” (συγγενῶν μου κατὰ σάρκα) (9:3), these privileges have also been shared with gentile believers through the messiah and the Spirit (4:16; 8:4, 15, 18, 23; 12:1). While Jews are the “natural” (κατὰ φύσιν) branches of the olive tree, gentiles are graciously grafted in “unnaturally” (παρὰ φύσιν) (11:17, 21, 24). While Jewish identity is bound closely with Torah (see above), messiah-following gentiles may also “fulfill” (πληρῶω/πλήρωμα) Torah through the Spirit (8:4; 13:8, 10) (Fredriksen 2022, pp. 369–71).

In various ways, therefore, Paul describes his gospel throughout Romans as universal in scope—for *all* who believe—yet with an irreducibly particular priority—to the Jew *first*. This pattern is especially prominent in 1:1–17. We should expect, then, that whatever Paul says about Jews in the rest of this letter will be relevant to his gentile audience. This observation is vital to bear in mind as we turn to Paul’s discussion in 1:18–3:20, where he takes this “Jew first” paradigm in an emphatically critical direction.

4. Divine Torah Confronts Jew First, Yet Also Greek (Romans 1–2)

As many scholars have recognized, Paul’s description of divine wrath against human wrongdoing in 1:18–32 contains multiple points of contact with the condemnation of gentile idolatry and wrongdoing characteristic of Hellenistic Jewish Torah-wisdom texts (esp. Wis 13–14), while Paul’s interlocutor in 2:1–11 has multiple affinities with the standpoint represented in these same texts (esp. Wis 15:1–6).¹⁰ However, scholars differ in their interpretations of the significance of Paul’s evocation of these Jewish Torah-wisdom traditions. In one common interpretation (e.g., [Dunn 1988](#), pp. 51–93), Paul first describes God’s wrath against gentile wrongdoing in typical Jewish fashion (1:18–32) and then attacks the assumption that Jews are immune (2:1–11). In another interpretation ([Rodríguez 2014](#), pp. 25–46), Paul first describes base gentile wrongdoing (1:18–32) and then undermines gentile moralism (2:1–11). In a third interpretation ([Linebaugh 2011](#)), Paul first universalizes human wrongdoing by altering Jewish Torah-wisdom traditions in a universalist direction (1:18–32), then affirms the universality of wrongdoing and divine wrath by critiquing the particularism of these traditions (2:1–11). However, none of these interpretations account for every element of Paul’s formulation of divine wrath being against “every individual human (πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου) who does evil, Jew first yet also Greek (Ἰουδαίου τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλλήνου)” (2:9). Linebaugh’s analysis, for example, explains Paul’s critique of Jewish Torah-wisdom traditions and the universalist element of the formula (πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου). However, it does not account for Paul’s particularist emphasis that divine judgment against human wrongdoing is for “Jew *first*”.

The particularist aspect can be explained by observing that Paul’s critique of a Jewish Torah-wisdom perspective shows many affinities to a Jewish prophetic perspective. According to many Jewish Torah-wisdom texts (e.g., Wis 12–15), the knowledge of God and his ways provided by Torah enabled Jews, far more readily than gentiles, to obey God and thereby receive his favor ([Linebaugh 2013](#), pp. 67–69). However, according to a prophetic perspective, the knowledge of God and his ways provided by the Torah often rendered Israel’s sin especially serious and subject to *particular* divine judgment because they, of all peoples, should have known better (e.g., 2 Kgs 17:15; Ezek 5:5–17). As [Staples \(2024\)](#), pp. 117–32 demonstrates, Paul in 1:18–32 alludes to numerous prophetic scriptures indicting Israel for engaging in the same wrongdoing as the nations even though God had especially revealed his glory to them (e.g., 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:11; Ps 106[LXX 105]:20; cf. Rom 1:21, 23) so that they stand under God’s sentence of death (e.g., Deut 30:19; cf. Rom 1:32). [Sloan \(2023\)](#), pp. 529–33 demonstrates that Paul’s indictment in 2:1–11 is characteristic of Jewish intramural critique against other Jews, accusing them of wrongdoing like that of the gentiles and so standing especially under his wrath (e.g., Jub. 1:9; 15:34; 1 Macc 1:14–15; Pss. Sol. 8:14; 17:16).

Nevertheless, Paul’s prophetic perspective against Israel’s sin does not terminate with unmitigated condemnation. The same perspective also suggests an eschatological hope for Israel’s repentance (2:4; cf., e.g., Ezek 18:21–32). Hence, Paul can say there will be “glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, for Jew first yet also for Greek (Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι)” (2:10). In 2:12–16, Paul provides further details of this universal-yet-particular schema of judgment and hope (2:12–16). On the one hand, Jewish knowledge

of God through the Torah leads to a particular judgment for Jews amid universal judgment for all (2:12). On the other hand, there is hope for those who do the Torah (2:13). Indeed, Paul sees that the prophetic hope of Torah written on the heart (Jer 31:33) can apply not only to Jews but even to gentiles (2:14–15) (Staples 2024, pp. 146–50). Paul foreshadows that these prophetic eschatological expectations will be fulfilled “according to my gospel, through Messiah Jesus” (2:16).

Reading Paul’s discourse in light of Jewish prophetic critique and eschatological hope also helps to understand his critique of the Jewish teacher in 2:17–29.¹¹ Paul again describes his interlocutor in terms familiar from Hellenistic Torah-wisdom traditions (cf. 2:1–16), but now focuses on the theme of *instruction*: the Torah enables Jews wisely to enlighten others, including the nations (2:17–20; cf., Wis 18:4; Sir 39:8, 10; Let. Aris. 312; Philo, *Mos.* 2.20; Josephus, *C. Ap.* 2.293) (Windsor 2021, pp. 238–41; Sloan 2023, pp. 534–37). Then, in the style of Jewish prophetic critique, Paul directly indicts the Torah-wisdom teacher for failure to keep the Torah (2:21–22).¹² While this critique is grounded in Jewish prophetic texts describing Israel’s history (e.g., Jer 7:9–11; Mal 1:6–14; 2:14–17; 3:8–10; Pss. Sol. 8:11–14; T. Levi 14–15) (Staples 2024, pp. 156–60; Sloan 2023, pp. 537–47), it is not detached from contemporary historical reality. As Dochhorn (2018) has shown, Paul’s critique also alludes to the publicly censured sins of notorious Jewish teachers in Rome (cf. Josephus, *A.J.* 18.81–84). Hence, Paul’s prophetic critique would have resonated strongly with his gentile audience.

Paul’s prophetic Jewish indictment of this Jewish Torah-wisdom teacher is directly relevant to his gentile readers. This is because the purpose of the indictment is not merely to point out the interlocutor’s personal hypocrisy or failure to achieve salvation for himself. It is to establish the failure of his Torah-wisdom project to glorify God by enlightening the world (cf. 2:17–20). The interlocutor has achieved the opposite result. His knowledge of and identification with the Torah means that he has not merely committed wrongdoing in a general sense; he has committed “transgression” (παράβασις) against the specific divine Torah (2:23; cf. 4:15; 5:14), and thus “brings shame on” (ἀτιμάζει) the God who gave this Torah (2:23). The Torah-wisdom teacher has thus become the principal cause (δι’ ὑμᾶς, “it is because of you”) of God’s name (τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ θεοῦ) being “slandered among the nations” (βλασφημεῖται ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν) (2:24)—an effect which is the opposite of Paul’s goal to glorify God’s name among the nations in his own prophetically informed gospel preaching (1:2, 5). Paul’s citation formula, “as it is written” (καθὼς γέγραπται), highlights that his indictment is consistent with a significant strand of the prophetic critique of Israel: Israel’s transgression of the Torah, leading to exile,¹³ was not merely a problem for Israel; it was a problem for the honor of God’s name among the nations (Isa 52:5; cf. Mal 1:11; T. Levi 14:1).

These themes of honor, shame, and praise among gentiles continue into 2:25–29. Paul’s topic is circumcision (περιτομή)—a primary marker of Jewish distinctiveness—and his focus is on whether circumcision “helps” (ὠφελεῖ) (2:25). This verb, which broadly means “to provide assistance”, usually takes an explicit or implied object:¹⁴ “circumcision would help [X].” Because modern interpreters typically assume that Paul is focusing on the individual salvation of his interlocutor, they assume the object must be reflexive: “circumcision would help [your salvation].” However, Paul’s focus at this point in his discourse is not on the interlocutor’s personal salvation but on his project to enlighten others through teaching the wisdom of the Torah (2:17–20). Paul has just highlighted the failure of this project: the interlocutor’s transgression of Torah (2:23) has resulted in the slander of God among the gentiles (2:24). It would fit better, therefore, to supply *the topic of the immediate discourse* as the object: “For circumcision would help [your project to enlighten others through Torah and so honor God among gentiles] if you were to practice Torah; but if you are a transgressor of Torah, your circumcision has become a foreskin” (2:25).

Jewish transgression of Torah leads to a situation where Jewish distinctiveness—marked by circumcision—is rendered worthless for the purpose of enlightening others and so honoring God among gentiles. Even an uncircumcised gentile who keeps the Torah in all other respects could be considered circumcised (2:26; cf. Philo, *QE* 2.2; Josephus, *A.J.* 20.41). In such a scenario, the entire project of Jews enlightening gentiles through teaching the wisdom of the Torah (cf. 2:17–20) has been turned on its head. The situation instead is one where an obedient gentile *criticizes* a Jew who “through letter and circumcision [is] a transgressor of Torah” (διὰ γράμματος καὶ περιτομῆς παραβάτην νόμου) (2:27). The instrumental preposition διὰ seems intentional (cf. Sloan 2023, p. 552 n. 121). Paul’s point here, consistent with the Jewish prophetic critical perspective outlined above (cf. 2:12), is that the fact that this Jewish person is bound to the written Torah through being circumcised is instrumental (διὰ) in rendering him not merely a sinner but “a transgressor (παραβάτην) of [written] Torah” (cf. 2:23; 4:15; 5:14).¹⁵ As a result, the God who gave this distinctly identifiable written Torah to this distinctly identifiable transgressor continues to be shamed among gentiles (cf. 2:23), and gentiles are now standing in judgment over Jews (2:27; cf. 2:1). This is not due merely to Jewish self-righteousness, failure to be Christian, or nationalistic pride. It is primarily due to Jewish failure to keep the Torah.

If we bear in mind that the topic of the discourse at this point is the honor and shaming of God’s name among gentiles through Jews (rather than a simple focus on questions concerning the personal salvation of Jews), 2:28–29 can also be read coherently. These two verses are often regarded as a redefinition of Jewish identity away from an ethnic definition (2:28) towards a non-ethnic, spiritual definition (2:29) (e.g., Longenecker 2016, pp. 317–19). However, the syntax is complex, and several words must be added to render this meaning.¹⁶ Furthermore, this meaning is inconsistent with Paul’s use of the regular ethnic sense of Ἰουδαῖος in the subsequent clause (3:1). Previous attempts to render the passage more simply, such that Paul is not redefining Jewish identity, have proved to be syntactically incoherent.¹⁷ Nevertheless, a syntactically coherent solution is possible, provided we recognize that the primary topic here is not Jewish identity per se but public recognition (2:17) and honor (2:24) among gentiles. The question Paul is addressing in 2:28–29 is not “Who is a Jew?” but “Which is the Jew whose is the praise?” Therefore, the passage can be rendered as follows:

“For the one in public is not [the] Jew, nor the circumcision in public in flesh, but the Jew in secret, and circumcision of the heart by Spirit not letter, [is the Jew] whose [is] the praise, not from humans but from God”. (Rom 2:28–29)¹⁸

This rendering is consistent with prophetic critique and restoration eschatology (cf. Sloan 2023, p. 553). Those publicly recognized as Jews (2:17, 28) correspond to the nation of Israel as a whole, as depicted in prophetic texts such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel. This “public” Israel has failed to keep the Torah. Therefore, it receives only shame and condemnation, both from God and from the nations (e.g., Jer 6:18–19; 22:8–9; Ezek 5:14–15; 22:4–5; 36:3–6). However, the prophetic hope is that there *will* be Jews who will receive heart circumcision by the Spirit and will thereby be obedient to the Torah (Jer 4:4; 31:31–33; Ezek 36:26–27; cf. Deut 10:16; 30:6). These Jews may not receive the public “praise” (ἔπαινος) expected by typical Torah-wisdom teachers (2:29; cf., Sir. Prol. 3; Sir 39:9–10; 44:1, 15; Let. Aris. 189, 193, 195, 206, 208, 212–13, 225–26, 234, 240, 246, 265–66, 291). Nevertheless, praise will come to them from God at the eschaton (Jer 33:9; cf. Deut 26:19). Thus, Paul’s statement in 2:28–29 follows the pattern of prophetic restoration eschatology: critique of Israel (2:28) gives way to eschatological hope (2:29) (Staples 2024, pp. 169–73). While this critique and hope is for “Jew first” (2:9–10), it is also profoundly relevant for gentiles (2:14–15, 23, 26–27).

5. The Particularity of Jewish Torah and the Universality of Sin and Judgment (Romans 3–8)

Two pervasive assumptions lie behind most contemporary interpretations of Rom 3:1–9. These are (1) the assumption that 3:1 refers to Jewish salvific “advantage” over gentiles and (2) the assumption that “God’s faithfulness” (τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ) (3:3) denotes God’s salvific commitment to Jews. Traditional interpretations of 3:1–9 based on these assumptions, which usually argue that Paul is engaging in a diatribe, exhibit significant stylistic and conceptual incoherence (King 2018, pp. 165–96). This incoherence has given rise to “rescriptive” readings, such as that by King (2018, pp. 197–293), who reverses the traditional understanding of participants in the diatribe and sees Paul engaging in speech-in-character. The multiplicity of such interpretations is exacerbated by a lack of clear identifying markers to delineate the purported participants in the diatribe (Timmins 2017, pp. 40–41; Mininger 2023, pp. 122–25). However, the analysis in the previous section allows another possibility for reading 3:1–9 that does not require appeal to diatribe at all. In this reading, Paul is (1) continuing to discuss the same topic as ch. 2, viz., the honor of God’s name among gentiles through Jews (rather than directly discussing Jewish salvific advantage), and (2) continuing to apply the same Jewish prophetic critical perspective he has adopted in ch. 2 (rather than affirming God’s salvific commitment to Israel).

In 3:1a, Paul asks (literally): “What, then, is the abundance (τὸ περισσὸν) of the Jew (τοῦ Ἰουδαίου)?” The word περισσός means “that which exceeds the ordinary measure” (Montanari 2015, p. 1644, s.v. “περισσός”). By itself, the word seldom, if ever, carries the sense of comparative advantage over another (Monkemeier 2018, pp. 84–88).¹⁹ A little later in Romans, Paul uses a parallel formulation: “the abundance (τὴν περισσεύαν) of the gift (τῆς χάριτος)” (5:17). Here, the genitive τῆς χάριτος depicts the messianic gift as the subject of the verbal idea of “abounding” with benefits for others (cf. 3:7).²⁰ Therefore, the genitive formulation τὸ περισσὸν τοῦ Ἰουδαίου in 3:1 is most likely depicting the Jew as the subject of the verbal idea of “abounding” *with benefits for others*. Paul is asking the question: In what way could Jews possibly “abound” and so benefit others (cf. Monkemeier 2018)? This is a pertinent question for Paul’s gentile audience at this point in the discourse since Paul has just argued that “public” (ἐν τῷ φανερό) Jewish Torah-wisdom teaching has only led to God’s name being slandered among the nations (2:24) while the prophetically oriented Jew who receives eschatological praise from God is “hidden” (ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ) from human beings (2:29).

Similarly, in 3:1b, Paul asks (literally): “What is the help (ἡ ὠφέλεια) of circumcision (τῆς περιτομῆς)?” The word ὠφέλεια with a genitive modifier usually denotes some assistance that a person or thing provides for another person or cause (cf. Thucydides 3.82.6; 6.17.1). As we have just seen, Paul has used the cognate verb in the previous section to introduce the topic of whether “circumcision (περιτομή) would help (ὠφελεῖ) the Jewish Torah-wisdom teacher’s program of enlightening others and so honoring God’s name among gentiles (2:25; cf. 2:21–24). In 3:1, Paul picks up the same question but broadens its scope: Is there any way Jewish distinctiveness (expressed in circumcision) could benefit the honor of God’s name among gentiles?

Paul’s answer begins by highlighting the fact that Jews were entrusted with God’s very words (3:2). The complication, of course, is that Paul has just prophetically critiqued a Torah-wisdom teacher (2:17–27) as a representative of “some” (τινες) Jews who have been unfaithful to these words (3:3). This raises the question of whether Jewish disobedience to God’s words thwarts God’s faithfulness to his words (3:3). To understand Paul’s answer, it is crucial to observe that “God’s faithfulness” (τὴν πίστιν τοῦ θεοῦ) does not always refer to God’s salvific commitment to Israel (cf. Timmins 2017, pp. 48–51). Instead, the

argument of 3:3–4 parallels the prophetically oriented descriptions of God’s interaction with rebellious Israel in Deut 32 (Sloan 2023, pp. 554–55). In Deut 32:4 (LXX), God’s being “faithful” (πιστός) aligns with his works being “true” (ἀληθινός) and his being “just” (δίκαιος). The immediate implication of this description of God’s character is not that God will save Israel but that he will bring his wrath on Israel for their sin, rebellion, and lack of “faithfulness” (πίστις) (Deut 32:19–38 LXX, quoting v. 20, cf. vv. 5–6), which will display his glory among the nations (Deut 32:39–43 LXX). Paul, following the same pattern, argues that Jewish disobedience to God’s words does not thwart God’s faithfulness (πίστις) (3:3). In fact, it enhances it because God’s words include the expectation of God’s judgment against Israel. Hence, when God brings wrath on those who have disobeyed his clear words, he demonstrates that he is “true” (ἀληθής) and he is “justified” (δικαιωθῆς) in his words and his judgment (3:4; cf. Psalms 51:4)—not just before Jews, but before “every human” (πᾶς . . . ἄνθρωπος) who does wrong (3:4) (Staples 2024, pp. 86–87; Sloan 2023, p. 555).

This, then, is Paul’s prophetic answer to his questions concerning how Jewish distinctiveness “abounds” and “helps” the honor of God’s name among gentiles (3:1). God’s wrath against this distinct people who have received his clear words displays the justice of his judgment against *all* human sin. In other words, as Paul puts it: “God’s truth, by my lie, abounded (ἐπερίσσευσεν) to his glory” (3:7). This notion that God has used his people’s wrongdoing to display his glory in judgment leads to natural “human” (3:5) questions surrounding God’s justice (3:5–8; cf. 9:19–20), which is also a prophetic theme (Ezekiel 18:25, 29; Malachi 2:17). Ultimately, however, these questions are moot (3:8). As Paul has argued, “both Jews and Greeks are under sin” (3:9).

In this passage, then, Paul is drawing out the universal implications of the prophetic critique of Israel. Jewish transgression of the particular Torah given to them enables God to display with clarity his universal justice and judgment of sin to the entire world. Paul summarizes this particular-to-universal logic this way: “For we know that whatever the Torah (ὁ νόμος) says, it speaks to those in [the sphere of] the Torah” (τοῖς ἐν τῷ νόμῳ), in order that every (πᾶν) mouth may be silenced and all the world (πᾶς ὁ κόσμος) may be liable to God’s justice” (3:19; cf. Deuteronomy 29:22–28; Ezekiel 5:15). Consistent with the prophetic witness, the primary benefit that humanity has received through Jewish possession of the Torah is not enlightenment leading to obedience (cf. 2:17–20) but “recognition of sin” (ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας) (3:20).

This depiction of the universal implications of the prophetic critique of Israel is foundational for the rest of Paul’s argument in chs. 3:21–8:39 (Staples 2024, p. 87). It provides the basis for Paul’s numerous compressed statements about the instrumentality of the Torah in divine purposes to reveal implicit “sin” (ἁμαρτία) and “misdeed” (παράπτωμα) by making it explicit “transgression” (παράβασις). “The Torah accomplishes wrath; and where there is no Torah, neither is there transgression (παράβασις)” (4:15; cf. Galatians 2:18). “Sin (ἁμαρτία) is not taken into account when there is no Torah” (5:13). “The Torah slipped in in order to increase the misdeed (παράπτωμα)” (5:20). “I would not have known sin (ἁμαρτίαν) except through Torah” (7:7; cf. vv. 8–13). Nevertheless, in each of these instances, this divine purpose for the Torah is not the final word. Rather, it is an intermediate purpose in a more ultimate purpose: to reveal universal grace and justification through faith in Jesus the Messiah (3:21–22; 4:16; 5:20–21; 7:25–8:4). Hence, while the righteousness of God has been manifested “apart from Torah”, it is nevertheless “testified to by the Torah and the prophets” (3:21) (cf. Chapman 2000, pp. 276–79; Rosner 2013, pp. 152–53).

6. Prophetic Critique Leads to Prophetic Hope (Romans 9–11)

This is not the place to explore the intricacies of Paul's discussion of his hope for Israel in Rom 9–11. However, we can highlight several observations arising from our investigation of chs. 1–8 that aid in navigating Paul's subsequent discourse.

Firstly, the starkly critical nature of Paul's depiction in chs. 1–8 of the value of the Torah—and thereby of distinct Jewish identity—in God's universal purposes explains the intense grief with which he opens chs. 9–11 (9:1–3). Paul is not only concerned for the credibility of his gospel (Jewett 2007, pp. 557–60), nor only concerned that God's faithfulness to his promises to Israel seems to be in jeopardy (e.g., Rodríguez 2014, p. 189; Wolter 2017, p. 30; Staples 2024, pp. 186–87). More fundamentally, his grief arises from his almost unremitting *prophetic* insistence in chs. 1–8 that God has used Jews and the Torah as instruments to display his wrath to the world. The question driving much of Rom 9–11, then, is whether Israelites are *merely* an instrument of divine wrath or whether they are *also* an instrument of divine mercy (e.g., 9:19–26) (Staples 2024, pp. 193–201).

Secondly, identifying the precise nature of Paul's problem with Jews and Israel helps to clarify the nature of his argumentation in chs. 9–11 (*pace* Novenson 2022c). As we have seen, Paul's most fundamental critique of Jews in chs. 1–3 is not simply self-righteousness or rejection of the messiah but failure to keep the divine Torah. Paul's argument in 9:30–10:4 recalls his argument in chs. 1–3. Israel, “while pursuing the Torah of righteousness, did not attain to the Torah (εἰς νόμον οὐκ ἔφθασεν)” (9:31; cf. 2:17–24). The aorist tense implies that this failure occurred prior to the advent of the messiah (Staples 2024, pp. 212–15). Certainly, the advent of the messiah also occasions the *present* plight of those Jews who fail to come to “recognition” of sin (10:2; cf. 3:20) and so fail to understand that righteousness through faith in the messiah is the end to which Torah was directed (10:3–4; cf. 3:21). However, Paul does not claim that God's wrath is against Israel merely for being too zealous for the Torah (10:2) nor merely for failing to receive the Messiah. Israel's “sin” (ἁμαρτία) or “misdeed” (παράπτωμα) (11:11–12, 27; cf. 5:20) is grounded in their longstanding disobedience to the Torah, as the prophetic Scriptures declared (10:21; cf. Isa 65:1–7).

Thirdly, identifying prophetic restoration eschatology as fundamental to Paul's *critique* of Israel enables us to grasp the prophetic nature of Paul's eschatological *hope* for Israel. We have seen occasions where Paul briefly refers to such a hope (e.g., 2:10, 29). In ch. 11, this hope becomes the primary topic. Just as Paul has argued that Israel's particular sin and God's particular judgment against them has revealed sin to the entire world and thereby brought grace for all who believe in the messiah (11:11; cf. 3:19–20; 5:20), so now he insists that his hope for the nations also provides hope for Israel (11:11–15, 25–32)—a theme that also appears in prophetic Scriptures (10:19; 11:11; cf. Deut 32:21, 34–42) (Jeong 2018, pp. 163–65; Staples 2024, pp. 278–81). God's wrath against Israel becomes the grounds for God's mercy to the nations and, *thereby*, his mercy to Israel (cf. Dixon 2020).

7. Conclusions

What, then, did Paul find wrong with Jews and Israel, according to Romans? Precisely what Israel's prophets found wrong with Israel as a whole: they failed to keep the Torah. In this, Jews were just like the rest of humanity. Nevertheless, the distinctness and particularity of God's revelation of the Torah to Israel demonstrated their sin particularly clearly, and so demonstrated the justice of God's wrath against sin to all the world. Hence, Paul's prophetic critique of Jews in Romans is relevant to his gentile audience. The revelation of God's wrath through the Jewish Torah provides a universal witness of God's wrath to the nations. This revelation of wrath is a precondition for the revelation of universal grace through Israel's Davidic messiah. Further, the revelation of wrath and grace to the nations is the basis for Paul's eschatological hope for Israel. Therefore, Paul's critique of

and hope for Jews and Israel is both thoroughly Jewish and inextricably bound to his hope of salvation for all the nations.

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Notes

¹ For further analysis of the New Perspective on Paul see [Ehrensperger \(2019b\)](#).

² While the complex textual history precludes certainty as to whether Rom 16:25–27 originally appeared at the very end of Romans, there are good reasons to regard it as a fitting recapitulation of Paul’s argument ([Longenecker 2016](#), pp. 1083–86).

³ Or perhaps more accurately, “within Israelism” ([Staples 2024](#), p. 346).

⁴ *Contra* the dichotomy between Jewish “particularism” and Pauline “universalism” influentially promoted by F. C. [Baur \(1873](#), 1.321–81 esp. 322), which has significant methodological and conceptual flaws ([Runesson 2021](#), pp. 27–29; [Holtz 2024](#), pp. 198–99).

⁵ See [Novenson \(2022b](#), p. 26) for the appropriateness of the gloss “Jew” for Ἰουδαῖος.

⁶ Especially in Rome ([Barclay 1996](#), p. 438).

⁷ [Gathercole \(2017](#), pp. 118–22) highlights the syntactical issues in 9:5 but argues that Paul is most likely identifying ὁ χριστός as “God over all”.

⁸ Staples argues that the designation “Israel” is extended to gentile believers who represent the eschatological fulfilment of hopes for the restoration of the northern kingdom (11:26) ([Staples 2024](#), pp. 312–22).

⁹ Many of these terms evoke the temple cultus ([Fredriksen 2017](#), p. 35).

¹⁰ The treatment by [Nygren \(\[1944\] 1951](#), pp. 86–88) was particularly influential. For a review see [Dodson \(2008](#), pp. 4–13). For an extended discussion see [Linebaugh \(2013](#), pp. 93–121, 126–33).

¹¹ Readings of Paul’s interlocutor as a gentile proselyte whom Paul does not regard as genuinely Jewish but only as a “so-called Jew” ([Thorsteinsson 2003](#), pp. 151–242; [Rodríguez 2014](#), pp. 47–72; [Thiessen 2016](#), pp. 43–71; [Novenson 2022c](#), pp. 96–109) have been seriously challenged ([Öhler 2021](#); [Windsor 2021](#), pp. 235–37; [Staples 2024](#), pp. 150–54; [Sloan 2023](#), pp. 533–37).

¹² Since the word οὐ does not appear at the beginning of the clause in 2:21, it is unlikely to be introducing a rhetorical question (*pace* [Cranfield 1975](#), 1.167; [Rodríguez 2014](#), p. 54); it is better read as negating the verb in a direct accusation (cf. [Dochhorn 2018](#), p. 102).

¹³ This is the thrust of the wider context in which Isa 52:5 appears (cf. [Oropeza 2021](#); *contra* [Hays 1989](#), pp. 44–46).

¹⁴ BDAG, s.v. “ὠφελέω” ([Bauer et al. 2000](#), pp. 1107–8).

¹⁵ [Thiessen \(2016](#), pp. 64–68) also highlights the instrumental nature of δῶ here, but his argument that Paul is an ethnic essentialist who believes that his proselyte interlocutor’s circumcision violates the command of eighth-day circumcision (cf. Gen 17:12; 21:4; Lev 12:3; cf. Jub. 15:25–26) is not explicit in the text and is unlikely on ethnographic grounds (cf. [Dibley 2021](#), pp. 6–13; [McDonald 2022](#), pp. 25–27).

¹⁶ [Cranfield \(1975](#), 1.175) adds eight words (discussed in [Förster 2024](#), pp. 56–57).

¹⁷ These attempts have rendered 2:28–29a as a complex subject and 29b as a predicate, thus, “For it is not the outward Jew . . . but the hidden Jew . . . whose praise [is]” ([Thiessen 2014](#), p. 377 following an unpublished paper by Hans K. Arneson; cf. [Windsor 2021](#), p. 245; [Novenson 2022c](#), pp. 95–96; [Förster 2024](#), p. 60). However, since ἐστίν (2:28) is enclitic, it must occur in the second position according to Wackernagel’s law, which means the first Ἰουδαῖος must be its predicate ([Staples 2024](#), pp. 165–66); hence the opening of the section must be rendered “For the one in public is not a/the Jew . . .”.

¹⁸ This rendering (updating and correcting [Windsor 2021](#), p. 245) recognizes that Ἰουδαῖος is the predicate of ἐστίν (so [Staples 2024](#), pp. 165–66) but implements a further possibility that Staples does not consider by translating the predicate as definite (“[the] Jew [. . . whose is the praise]”) rather than indefinite (“a Jew”). This is an entirely viable option for an anarthrous preverbal predicate nominative (BDF §273) ([Blass and Debrunner 1961](#), p. 143), as per Colwell’s rule: “a predicate nominative which precedes the verb cannot be translated as an indefinite or a ‘qualitative’ noun solely because of the absence of the article; if the context suggests that the predicate is definite, it should be translated as a definite noun in spite of the absence of the article” ([Colwell 1933](#), p. 20). Here, the discourse topic and the complexity of the syntax create a context which strongly suggests a definite translation (“[the] Jew [. . . whose is the praise]”).

- ¹⁹ Even when *περισσός* or *περισσεία* carries a sense of “benefit”, the recipient of the benefit is typically expressed in the dative rather than the genitive (Monkemeier 2018, pp. 84–88). When *περισσός* carries the sense of “superior” with a genitive, the genitive refers to the inferior party: “you are superior to those within” (σὺ τῶν ἔνδον εἶ περισσά) (Sophocles, *El.* 155).
- ²⁰ This understanding of τῆς χάριτος as a subjective genitive modifying τὴν περισσείαν leading to benefits for others is strongly supported by constructions in the same passage in which the noun is the subject of cognate verbs: ἡ χάρις . . . εἰς τοὺς πολλοὺς ἐπερίσσευσεν (“the gift . . . abounded for the many”) (5:15); ὑπερπερίσσευσεν ἡ χάρις (“the gift super-abounded”) (5:20).

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