

CHAPTER

19 Paul and Scripture

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Abstract

This essay gives a programmatic account of Paul's engagement with scripture, focusing especially on Paul's most frequently cited source texts: Genesis and Psalms. Paul's engagement with scripture, it is argued, is shaped by three main factors. First, he views himself not primarily as an interpreter of scripture but as a proclaimer of the gospel. Second, Paul's own Pharisaic past makes him acutely aware that most of his fellow Jews read the same texts he does, and yet do not share his faith in Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah. Third, Paul's scriptural interpretation occurs in the context of letters addressed to communities he has founded. Paul does not engage with scripture to the same extent in all his letters. It would be a mistake to characterize him as, always and in every respect, a 'biblical theologian'. Yet it would be a greater mistake to underestimate the value and significance he attributes to scripture.

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EARLY Christian communities inherit from their Jewish environment the concept of scripture, or 'holy writings' (Rom 1:2). These are texts of ancient origin, attributed to revered figures such as Moses, David, Solomon, or the prophets, and deemed to possess unassailable authority though their interpretation may be open to question. These sacred texts form the comprehensive context in which Jews of the Second Temple period practise their religion and debate its meaning and implications. Naturally there are many other texts in circulation, which may well be highly esteemed by their users. It is not always clear exactly where the boundary between canonical and non-canonical writings is to be located. In practice, a non-canonical text of recent origin can exercise far greater influence than an ancient canonical one. Yet in principle the distinction is clear, and is presupposed in many of the later writings themselves. Canonical and non-canonical writings are also addressed to different audiences. Any Jew who regularly attends a synagogue will become familiar with the scriptural texts through hearing them read each Sabbath. The holy writings are also highly public writings, while non-canonical texts are written for more limited readerships.

Since earliest Christianity is just another variant within the complex milieu of the late Second Temple period, the sacred texts remain fundamentally important for it. Indeed their value is enhanced by the conviction that, in many and various ways, they speak of the Messiah Jesus even though they long predate him. Even for Christians of non-Jewish origin, the credibility of Christian claims about Jesus—that he died for our sins, that he was raised—depends on showing that these claims conformed to the scripture. When a Gentile becomes a Christian, he or she also submits to the authority of Jewish scripture. When a Jew becomes a Christian, he or she retains an existing commitment to scriptural authority. However dramatic the transformation brought about by Paul's conversion, he does not abandon the sacred texts he has known intimately in his career as a Pharisee. These texts continue to accompany him as he embarks on his new-

found vocation as a Christian missionary. At this point, there is no question of any Christian additions to Jewish scripture. Yet these same texts are now read quite differently, in the light of the new messianic conviction—on which they in turn shed a light of their own.

1. Basic Contours

Paul's engagement with scripture is shaped by three main factors. First, he views himself not primarily as an interpreter of scripture but as a proclaimer of the gospel. He is an apostle, sent by the risen Jesus to found communities in which his name is acknowledged. Paul is not at liberty to withdraw from this commission: 'Necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor 9:16). Yet this gospel is not a self-contained discourse that descends directly from heaven with no antecedents (as in the so-called 'apocalyptic' reading of Paul advocated by Campbell 2009). At the heart of the gospel is the announcement not simply that Christ died for our sins and was raised but that he died and was raised *according to the scriptures* (1 Cor 15:3–4). In Scripture the gospel is 'pre-proclaimed' or proclaimed in advance (Gal 3:8; cf. Rom 1:2), and that proclamation prior to Christ is a necessary element within all proclamation after Christ. As a preacher of the gospel, Paul *must* also be an interpreter of scripture. Communities built on the foundation of Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:10) will be scriptural communities, since Jesus' messiahship is itself scripturally shaped. Without scripture there is no Messiah and no gospel. Scripture will be required not only in the initial preaching of the gospel but also in its ongoing 'defence and confirmation' to outsiders (Phil 1:7) and in the internal life and worship of the community. Paul can actually claim that the scriptures were written long ago but for 'our' benefit, to warn, instruct, and foster hope (1 Cor 10:11; Rom 15:4).

Second, Paul's own Pharisaic past makes him acutely aware that most of his fellow Jews read the same texts he does, and yet do *not* share his faith in Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah (see Watson 2007). For these readers or hearers of scripture, the foundation of belief and practice is not Jesus Christ but the Law revealed to Moses at Mount Sinai, encoded in the last four books of the Torah or Pentateuch. Here the unique covenantal relationship between God and his people is definitively and unsurpassably revealed. Here it is told how a rabble of escaping slaves came to be *Israel*, the elect people of God. To be Israel is therefore to act out this unique vocation by practising the way of life codified in the divine commandments. If that is what scripture is most fundamentally about, the claim that it actually points forward to the Messiah Jesus, and that *he* is the divinely established foundation of the relationship between God and humanity, will seem a perverse misreading, a travesty of the truth. Paul therefore labours to show that a Torah-centred construal of scripture is not the way to life and salvation.

Third, Paul's scriptural interpretation occurs in the context of letters addressed to communities he has founded, or (in the case of Romans) plans to visit. He might have written scriptural commentaries, as some of his contemporaries did, working through the sacred text phrase by phrase or in a series of question and answers; but he did not. Because he interprets scripture only in the context of his apostolic, community-founding vocation, his interpretations are always motivated by the wider issues of community life that he addresses. His interpretation of scripture is at the same time a *use* of scripture. Interpreting scripture is always a means to an end, not an end in itself; scripture is an instrument for performing a range of different tasks, rather than being an object of contemplation in its own right. Conversely, however, Paul's varied uses of scripture normally involve *interpretation*—more or less explicit claims about what the text does or does not mean. To interpret scripture, rather than simply quoting and applying it, is to assume that its sense and significance are not obvious but require the specialized skills of the interpreter if they are to be brought to light. Paul clearly casts himself in such a role: for him, the use and the interpretation of scripture are one and the same thing, two sides of a single coin. Pragmatically oriented though they may be, his interpretations often make considerable intellectual demands on his addressees, to which some will have been better able to respond than others (see Stanley 2004).

Paul's uses or interpretations of scripture take three main forms: citations, allusions, and narrative summaries. *Citations* consist in scriptural statements identified as such by an introductory formula, for example, 'as it is written' (Rom 1:17, 4:17, 8:36; 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 8:15). This introductory formula occurs in several different forms, and signals that the following words are not Paul's but scripture's, marking them off from his own discourse and claiming scriptural support for it. It does not identify the source of the quotation, but treats scripture as a single unified entity on the assumption that each individual scriptural author speaks for all. Paul's readers do not need to know that the statement, 'And the person righteous by

faith will live' was written by the prophet Habakkuk (Rom 1:17, quoting Hab 2:4). What they do need to know is that this statement occurs in scripture and that it represents the testimony of scripture as a whole. Elsewhere, however, Paul does attribute the texts he cites to their respective authors. It is specifically David who, in one of the psalms, 'pronounces a blessing' on those whose sins are forgiven (Rom 4:6). The attribution may be to a book named after its author ('As it says in Hosea ...', Rom 9:25), but more commonly to an author as speaking in the present tense in and through what he wrote ('Isaiah cries out ...', Rom 9:27; 'Moses says ...', Rom 10:19). The unity of the scriptural testimony is expressed in the general introductory formulae ('as it is written', 'for it is written', 'according to what is written'), whereas the specific formulae indicate that this is a differentiated unity in which a range of voices is to be heard.

Allusions occur where scriptural words are incorporated into Paul's discourse without being differentiated from it by way of an introductory formula. Thus the reader or hearer is not alerted to the fact that these are scriptural words, and may or may not recognize that this is the case (see Hays 1989; and further Hays 2005). In Romans 2:5–6, Paul is addressing a fictional 'judge' who applauds the preceding indictment of Gentile sin (Rom 1:18–32) yet practises the same sins himself:

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By your hard and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and of the revelation of the just judgment of God, who will render to each according to his works.

The final words here are identical to the conclusion of Psalm 61 (62), apart from the change from second to third person: 'For you will render to each according to his works' (Ps 61:13 LXX). Paul *might* have written as follows:

... the revelation of the just judgment of God; *as it is written*, 'You will render to each according to his works.'

In fact, Paul chooses to integrate the scriptural words fully into his own discourse. His readers or hearers may or may not notice the allusion. Their understanding of the passage will be enhanced if they do notice it, but it will not be significantly impaired if they do not. Similarly in 1 Corinthians 15:32, Paul states that 'if the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'. The ironic exhortation is derived from Isaiah 22:13, where the prophet complains of those who continue to feast exuberantly when they should be mourning and fasting. In its original context, the exhortation is placed in the mouth of the revellers, and there is no reference to resurrection. Paul's first readers may have sensed that the vivid language may reflect an allusion to a scriptural text, but the language is used for its rhetorical force rather than its scriptural origin.

Narrative summaries occur when Paul engages with scriptural narratives, drawn almost exclusively from Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, apart from an isolated reference to the Elijah narrative (1 Kings 19; cf. Rom 11:2–4). These narratives are never cited in full, although Paul likes to attach specific quotations to his summaries so that a key element is identified in the words of scripture itself. Summarizing a story from Numbers 21 about an unhappy experience during Israel's wanderings in the wilderness, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:9:

We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were killed by snakes.

The summary assumes that readers will already be familiar with the story and only need to be reminded of it. In a preceding reference to the better-known story of the Golden Calf, however, Paul adds a citation to his summary (1 Cor 10:7, citing Exod 32:6):

Do not be idolators as some of them were; *as it is written*, 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose to play.'

Without a knowledge of the story, the citation is meaningless since it says nothing about idolatry. Readers are expected to know that the debauched behaviour in question took place in the context of an act of idolatrous worship.

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Elsewhere, Paul's narrative summaries are often highly interpretative. Speaking of the story of Abraham and Hagar (Gen 16), Paul states in Galatians 4:22–23:

It is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise.

As usual, the retelling of the story is perfunctory. Paul is too much the theologian to be a good storyteller. The sons and the women are not even named as Ishmael and Isaac, Hagar and Sarah. (Admittedly Hagar and Isaac are named soon afterwards, but only in order to bring out their allegorical significance: cf. Gal 4:24–25, 28.) The contrasts between slavery and freedom, flesh and promise, have some basis in the Genesis text, but they are essentially Paul's own reformulations of the underlying theological issues.

As we have seen, scripture for Paul is a differentiated unity. The individual scriptural text can represent the voice of scripture as a whole, but it can also represent the distinctive voices of Moses, David, or Isaiah. This raises the question how far Paul recognizes the distinctive character of specific books. Does he focus only on isolated scriptural passages (Tuckett 2000), or is it possible to detect patterns and connections within his use of texts from the same literary contexts? In support of the latter view (on which see further Watson 2008, 2016), we turn now to consider how Paul uses material from two of the dozen or so scriptural books from which his citations, allusions, or narrative summaries are drawn: Genesis and the Psalter. (For Paul and Isaiah see especially Wilk 1998; Wagner 2002.)

2. Genesis

Adam and Abraham are the two figures from Genesis that are of most concern to Paul. Adam's significance is primarily Christological whereas Abraham is the great exemplar of faith. Given these two very different roles, it is not surprising that Paul never connects Adam and Abraham, even where he discusses them in consecutive chapters (Romans 4, 5).

p. 362 *Adam.* In the first creation account, it is said that God made the first human(s) 'in the image of God' (Gen 1:27). Like other ancient readers, Paul assumes that this 'image' is to be distinguished from God on the one hand and humans on the other. It cannot simply be identified with God; the text does not say that God made humans to be like himself. Nor can it be identified with humans, for they are said to be 'in' or 'in conformity to' the image of God. It is, Paul believes, Christ himself who is 'the image of God'. In 2 Corinthians 4:4, he speaks of unbelievers' failure to see 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is [the] image of God'. This connection between image and light is further developed in the parallel statement in 2 Corinthians 4:6, where, like the fourth evangelist (cf. John 1:5), Paul connects Christ with the primordial light that shone forth in the darkness (cf. Gen 1:3):

The God who said, 'Out of darkness let light shine!' has shone in our hearts with the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

This narrative summary and the preceding 'image of God' allusion are to very well-known scriptural texts, and in this case it is important for readers to make the connections. If they are unaware of the link with the scriptural creation narratives, they will misunderstand what Paul says.

In identifying Christ with the image of God, Paul is not interested in the pre-existent Christ's role in creation. Christ's imagehood is significant not so much for human origins as for human destiny, and relates above all to the risen, exalted, and coming Christ. Thus the human being made from 'the dust of the earth' is not *preceded* by some heavenly archetype but *succeeded and surpassed* by the Lord from heaven (cf. 1 Cor 15:46, 48). These two figures, Adam and Christ—one standing at the beginning of the human story, the other at the end—also mark our own beginning and end:

Just as we have borne the image of the earthly [one], so we shall also bear the image of the heavenly [one].

(1 Cor 15:49)

In the background here lies Genesis 5:1–3, where it is said not only that God made Adam in the image of God but also that Adam produced a son, Seth, 'in his own image'. (There is no reference here to Eve.) Like Seth, all descendants of Adam are in his image; Paul's point is that we shall eventually participate not in the image of Adam but in the image of God, that is, in the glorified Christ. The Genesis texts are read here Christologically and eschatologically.

The reference to the first, ‘earthly’ human being alludes to Genesis 2:7, where, in a second fundamental scriptural statement about human origins, it is said that:

God formed the man, dust from the earth, and breathed into his face the breath of life, and the man became a living soul.

Paul sees Christological potential in this text as in Genesis 1:26–27. While ‘the first human, Adam, became a living soul, the last Adam [Christ] became a lifegiving spirit’ (1 Cor 15:45). Paul’s statement is closely modelled on the Genesis text, as the correspondences of *first/last*, *living/lifegiving*, and *soul/spirit* indicate. It is, then, the scriptural text that gives rise to Paul’s eschatological claims. These claims do not arise exclusively from scripture; Paul does not learn from Genesis that Christ is risen. Yet without the scriptural model these eschatological and Christological affirmations would not have been possible.

p. 363 The same is true of another appeal to the opening chapters of Genesis in 1 Corinthians 15, which takes the form of a repeated and condensed narrative summary. Paul states in vv. 21–22 that:

since through a man came death, so through a man came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive.

Two points here directly reflect the influence of Genesis 2–3. First, Jesus’ role in the future eschatological resurrection is ascribed specifically to his humanity—and not, for example, to a divine power concealed within that humanity. Second, Adam’s role in establishing the universality of death (cf. Gen 5:3–27) suggests that Christ’s role in the resurrection can be no less universal. It is the scriptural narrative that here presses Paul beyond his normal assumption (to which he reverts in the very next verse) that Christ’s resurrection is significant primarily for those who belong to him, i.e., Christians (cf. 1 Cor 15:23). But can it be true that Christ has a more limited impact on humanity than Adam?

Paul returns to this issue in Romans 5:12–21, where he again insists that Adam must be seen as a ‘type’ or model of Christ (5:14). Adam’s typological role cannot consist in his enabling sin and death to enter the world (5:12). Rather, Adam is a type of Christ in that his action determines the destiny of *all* his descendants. Owing to one man’s sin, all became sinners; one’s man’s condemnation led to the condemnation of all (5:18–19). Paul’s statements reflect the whole of the Genesis Primeval History, which, as he rightly says, speaks of sin and death even in the absence of the Law (5:13–14). Given that Christ is to be interpreted in Adamic terms, the scriptural narrative again compels Paul to affirm that what Christ does for the benefit of humanity is no less comprehensive in its scope than what Adam did to humanity’s detriment:

As one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s righteous act leads to acquittal and life for all. As by one man’s obedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous.

(Rom 5:18–19)

The parallelism between the two statements indicates that ‘many’ actually means ‘all’. The Adamic pattern also leads Paul to envisage Christ’s death as an *act*, as Adam acted when he ate the forbidden fruit. Elsewhere it is said that Christ ‘became obedient unto death’ (Phil 2:8), and this is no doubt the sense here. Yet previous statements about the death of Christ in Romans have tended to stress *God’s* agency rather than Christ’s. *God* made the crucified Christ a point of mercy and reconciliation (cf. 3:25). In Christ’s death for sinners it is *God* who shows his love for us (5:8). Later, we read that *God* did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all (8:32), an allusion to a quite different Genesis narrative (cf. Gen 22:16). Where Paul avails himself of the Adamic template, however, Christ’s death can only represent his own obedient human act, which transforms and redeems the human situation in its entirety.

p. 364 In these passages Paul’s statements are the product of an encounter between his gospel and the Genesis narrative. They are not simply exegetical claims; Paul does not suppose that Genesis speaks directly of Christ, yet Genesis does enable him—as an apostle of Christ—to comprehend more fully the breadth and depth of the divine saving act that occurs in and through the human act. Scriptural narrative represents a hermeneutical frame within which the fundamental claims of the gospel must be set if their scope and significance is to come to light. Without that scriptural hermeneutic, the Pauline gospel might seem to consist in no more than a short sequence of arbitrary fact-like claims, to be believed at all costs.

Abraham. If universal human destiny is determined by the act of one man, Jesus Christ, who acts out and reverses and transcends the Adamic model of Genesis 2–3, this might seem to reduce the rest of humanity to virtual passivity. Adam models Christ's agency; Christian agency is modelled by Abraham, in the form of his believing response to the divine promise and the way of life based on that response. The Genesis promise motif occurs in a number of forms, and Paul engages with several of them in turn (see Watson 2016: 167–200).

Abraham is called to leave his home country and to travel to an unknown land where he and his descendants will be blessed—a blessing that will spread to encompass the whole of humanity. 'In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed' (Gen 12:3 LXX), or, in a later version of the same promise, 'in him all the *nations* of the world shall be blessed' (Gen 18:28). Paul's citation in Galatians 3:8 retains the second person address from the first passage but inserts the term 'nations' from the second. In the absence of the original qualification, '... of the world', *ethnē* now refers not to collectivities (nations) but to the sum total of non-Jewish individuals (Gentiles): 'In you shall all Gentiles be blessed'. Once again, the individual and the individual act are determinative for universal destiny; but the question is how this is the case, given that the scriptural text does not specify the content of this blessing.

How was Abraham blessed, and how may Gentiles be blessed in him? Paul does not find the answer in Abraham's material wealth, his long life, or his many children. These are of no significance to Gentiles. The answer is to be found in Genesis 15:6: 'Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness' (cited Gal 3:6). If we ask *what* was 'reckoned as righteousness', the only possible answer is that it was Abraham's believing or faith. He is righteous before God because he responds positively—that is, believingly—to the divine word addressed to him. Elsewhere, Paul shows some interest in the content of the word that evoked Abraham's faith: 'Thus shall your seed be', with reference to the stars in the night sky (Gen 15:5, cited in Rom 4:18). More characteristically, however, he abstracts Abraham's response from its context and sees it as a model response to the divine word in general, which, for Christians, takes the form of the gospel proclamation. Thus, immediately before the citation in Galatians 3:8, faith is twice associated with 'hearing' (3:2, 5), and with a proclamation of the crucified Christ so vivid as to make him almost visibly present (3:1). In the promise of universal blessing, then, scripture anticipates 'that God will justify the Gentiles by faith' (3:8). Paul reads his two selected texts (Gen 12:3; 15:6) in the light of one another, combining the universal scope of the one with the sharply defined content of the other.

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Paul is at pains to distinguish this reading of Abraham's story from another perhaps more obvious one. Surely what the scriptural narrative celebrates is Abraham's *deeds*: his heroic migration (Gen 12), his concern for the integrity of his family (Gen 13–14), his unhesitating obedience to the command to circumcise himself and his household (Gen 17), his hospitality and his compassion (Gen 18), and above all his willingness to offer up his beloved son (Gen 22)? As a later Christian interpreter puts it, criticizing Paul's exclusive appeal to Genesis 15:6:

Was not our father Abraham justified by works, when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by works, and the scripture was fulfilled which says, 'Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness'.

(Jas 2:21–23)

Faith comes to expression in acts of obedience, and is empty without them: however obvious and commonsensical this might seem as a conclusion from Abraham's story, Paul utterly rejects it. No doubt Abraham's actions are (for the most part) impressive and inspiring. If Abraham was justified by his actions, he has every reason to be satisfied with this commendation from God, and we have every reason to revere and emulate him (cf. Rom 4:2). The only difficulty, easily overlooked, is that scripture says nothing of this (cf. Rom 4:3). It tells us that Abraham's righteousness lies neither in a generally virtuous life nor in a single culminating act of obedience such as the offering of Isaac. Abraham's righteousness is established when he believes the divine word. This is a purely interior act, invisible to an external observer. To believe is a purely responsive action, a reflex of a situation in which the primary reality is the address of another—in this case, God. Paul also notes that the moment of justification took place while Abraham was still uncircumcised (Rom 4:9–12). At the time, he was more like a Gentile than a Jew. As such, he is a model for Gentiles. When, some years later, he obeyed the command to subject himself to circumcision, he was still righteous by virtue of his faith—no more or less so than previously. In his new circumcised state, he is a model for Jews. His

Unlike his older contemporary Philo of Alexandria, Paul does not practise the continuous exposition of scripture. How he might have interpreted the story of the Flood or Joseph in Egypt remains entirely unknown. Even in the case of his two favoured figures, Adam and Abraham, he remains highly selective, bringing his intense theological energy to bear on specific passages or motifs where scripture and gospel seem to converge and to illuminate one another. Naturally, his reflections on Genesis are also shaped by situational factors within the congregations he addresses. Yet for the most part these situational factors are hardly unique to a particular congregation. If the figures of Adam and Abraham initially seemed relevant to readers in Corinth or Galatia respectively, ↵ Paul was able to resume his reflection on both figures when writing to the Christians of Rome.

3. Psalms

In Romans 4, Paul's interpretation of Genesis 15:6 is supported by a citation from Psalm 31:1–2a LXX. We learn from the Genesis text that Abraham was justified or 'reckoned righteous' on account of his faith in the divine word, and what it means to be 'reckoned as righteous' is clarified by a statement attributed to David, traditionally regarded as the author of many of the psalms. Here scripture interprets scripture:

So too David pronounces a blessing on the person to whom God 'reckons righteousness' apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not reckon sin.'

(Rom 4:6–8)

The psalm text indicates that for Abraham or anyone else to be 'reckoned righteous' involves a divine not-reckoning of sins. For Paul this is an important supplementary point, as Genesis has nothing to say about Abraham's sins. Even where his conduct might seem most dubious and is criticized by his contemporaries (cf. Gen 12:10–20; 20:1–18), the narrator himself implies no criticism. A link between being declared, made, or reckoned righteous and the forgiveness of sins must therefore be found elsewhere. Paul selects the passage from Psalm 31 in preference to others on account of the verbal connection it enables him to make between the reckoning of righteousness and the not-reckoning of sin.

The psalm text is thus used both to interpret a primary text and to identify sin as the one great problem within the divine–human relationship that needs to be acknowledged and addressed. A similar dual role for material from the psalms is to be seen in Romans 3:10–18, where it is used to articulate the law's verdict on sinful humanity. Here, passages from a range of psalms (and one from Isaiah) are linked together with no indication of their separate origins. Language that originally speaks of the psalmist's enemies (especially Gentiles) is extended so that it also addresses Jews (cf. Rom 3:9, 19). Paul's treatment of Psalm 13:1–3 LXX illustrates the reshaping this involves; the material he uses is italicized.

The fool said in his heart, 'There is no God!'
They are corrupt, they practise abominations,
there is no one who does good, not even one.
The Lord looked down from heaven upon the sons of men,
to see if there is anyone *who understands or seeks God.*
All have turned away, together they have become worthless,
there is no one who does good, not even one.

p. 367 In Romans 3:9–12, this becomes:

There is no one who is righteous, not even one.
There is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God.
All have turned away, together they have become worthless,
there is no one who does good, not even one.

Even in its original form, the psalm seems to deliver a remarkably sweeping verdict on humanity as a whole. There is an ambiguity here, however. Does the psalmist exempt himself and other observant Jews from the

general condemnation? The rest of the psalm suggests that he does, apparently distinguishing God's people Israel from their enemies. Yet the language of the opening verses still stands. In his selective rewriting, Paul seeks to make it clear that statements about 'no one' and 'all' should be taken to mean exactly what they say.

Three further passages in Romans 3 confirm that Paul cites or alludes to the psalms as he outlines his account of sin as the great distortion and perversion of the relationship between God and humanity.

Do not enter into judgment with your servant,

For no living being will be justified before you.

(Ps 142:2 LXX)

Therefore by works of law *no flesh will be justified before him*, for through the law comes knowledge of sin.

(Rom 3:20)

The psalmist's sense of the all-pervasiveness of sin is clearer here than in Psalm 13 in its original form. There, the psalmist is exempted from the judgement he pronounces; here, he includes himself. Paul's supplementary references to the law are intended to indicate both the basis on which God does 'enter into judgment' with humanity and the inevitability of a negative verdict, even for those who know the law and seek to practise it. On his reading of Psalm 142, the psalmist makes it unambiguously clear that any attempt to distinguish a righteous Israel from sinful Gentiles is untenable. What Paul hears in these psalm texts is unremittingly negative.

Yet another negative verdict on humankind is pronounced in Psalm 115:2 LXX, where it is said simply that 'every human is false'. Alluding to this passage, Paul adds that God alone is true (Rom 3:4) and then cites explicitly from a further psalm which speaks not of the unrighteousness of humans but of the righteousness of God:

Let God be true and every human false, as it is written, 'so that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you enter into judgment'.

The citation is from Psalm 50:6 LXX, and occurs within a penitential context:

Against you only have I sinned and done evil before you,

so that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you enter into judgment.

p. 368 What are these divine 'words'? In the original context in Psalm 50 (51), there may be a reference back to the occasion of the psalm, which David is said to have written 'when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone into Bathsheba'. On that occasion Nathan confronted David with his guilt by way of a parable in which David is represented in the role of a wealthy man who steals a poor man's beloved lamb: 'Thou art the man!' (2 Sam 12:7). In the indictment that follows, it is God who speaks to David through the prophet: 'Thus says the Lord the God of Israel ...' (12:7–12). It is these divine words spoken through Nathan that lead directly to David's confession of guilt, 'I have sinned against the Lord' (2 Sam 12:13). Against this background, the statement in the psalm ('... so that you may be justified in your words ...') relates to David's confession of sin. In confessing his sin, he thereby acknowledges that the divine word addressed to him by Nathan is just. Accused by God, David does not attempt to defend his conduct; God is in the right, he is in the wrong.

In Paul's use of the citation from Psalm 50 LXX, the accusatory divine words are addressed not to an individual such as David but to all humans without exception. 'Let God be true and every human false' may be paraphrased as: Let the truth of God's judgement be acknowledged as it is seen that every human is false. The condemnatory words whose justice will finally be acknowledged are the words of scripture, specifically the psalm allusion in Romans 3:4 and the citations in 3:10–18. There is, then, a scriptural indictment of humanity as a whole, which for Paul is most clearly articulated in the language of the psalter.

The interconnectedness of Paul's scriptural interpretation is evident from the case of Psalm 115 LXX. Owing to a further discrepancy between the Hebrew and Greek versions of the psalter (on which see above), this

psalm opens with a passage (vv. 1–2) that occurs at Psalm 116:10–11 in the Hebrew. As a result, the passage in its Greek form has considerably greater emphasis, arising abruptly out of nowhere. Language taken over by Paul is again italicized:

*I believed, so I spoke,
And I was greatly humiliated.
I said in my astonishment,
Every human is false.*

A Greek connective is added in line 2 (*de* = ‘and’), separating it from line 1 which then becomes a self-contained statement. Lacking a corresponding connective, the Hebrew might be translated: ‘I believed even when I said, “I am greatly afflicted” ...’.

The more emphatic connection between believing and speaking is exploited by Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:13–14:

Having the same spirit of faith as is expressed in the text, ‘I believed, so I spoke’, we too believe and so we speak, knowing that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence.

p. 369 While Paul may refer here specifically to his apostolic ministry, it is more likely that the believing and speaking in question are characteristic of all Christians: ‘If you confess [↳] with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’ (Rom 10:10, another passage with a rich scriptural background). As we have seen, Paul alludes elsewhere to the following verse of Psalm 115: ‘Let God be true and *every human false*’ (Rom 3:4). He himself never explicitly connects the two texts from this psalm. Nevertheless, it seems likely that a coherent reading of the passage underlies the citation and allusion in the two separate letters. Paul identifies himself closely with a psalmist who seems to connect his faith with the devastating recognition that ‘every human is false’ and the humiliation of seeing himself as included in this verdict. Similarly in Romans, the negative verdict of the law is the backdrop to what Paul has to say about faith.

Sin (falsehood) and faith are opposed to one another in Paul’s reading of Psalm 115. In faith, the perversion of the divine–human relationship through sin is overcome. This is a faith evoked by the gospel message and not some general attitude of trust, just as Abraham’s faith was evoked by the divine word of promise (cf. Rom 10:14; 4:16–18). Paul does not otherwise turn to the psalms for statements about faith. Yet he does find a closely related theme. In his utopian vision for the (Roman) Christian community, Jew and Gentile are to be united in faith. Abraham—first Gentile, then Jew, yet righteous by faith in both states—is the symbol of that unity (Rom 4:9–12). United in faith, Jew and Gentile should worship God together. Towards the end of his letter to the Romans, Paul underlines this point with not one but four linked scriptural citations, two of which are from the psalter (Rom 15:9, 11, citing Pss 17:50 and 116:1 respectively):

Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.

Praise the Lord all Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him.

We might say that, for Paul, the psalter begins with universal sin and ends with universal praise. That is certainly true of his own engagement with the psalter in this letter.

Paul does not engage with scripture to the same extent in all his letters. It would be a mistake to characterize him as, always and in every respect, a ‘biblical theologian’. Yet it would be a greater mistake to underestimate the value and significance he attributes to scripture. It is often implied that Paul practises scriptural interpretation reluctantly, only when compelled to do so by Jewish Christian opponents whom he must combat on their own terrain (see Martyn 1997). The gospel would represent the ‘coherent core’ of Paul’s thought, scriptural interpretation an aspect of its ‘contingent adaptation’ to issues arising in his congregations (for this flawed distinction, see Beker 1980). On that view, gospel and scripture would be fundamentally alien to one another. Scripture would be forced into outward conformity to the gospel in order to gain a rhetorical advantage over rigidly biblicist opponents in Galatia or elsewhere. If that were correct, the connections and coherences that have come to light in Paul’s readings in Genesis and the Psalms would hardly be possible. In reality, Paul practises scriptural interpretation because compelled to do so by the gospel itself.

For a much fuller explication of the account given here, see Watson (2016). Early, influential forays in this field of study include especially Koch (1986) and Hays (1989). Important edited volumes demonstrating the state of scholarly discussion include Evans and Sanders (1993) and Stanley (2012). While the present essay has focused especially on Genesis and Psalms, Paul also engages disproportionately with Isaiah, on which see Wilk (1998) and Wagner (2002).

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