

Jew or Self-Styled Jew in Romans 2:17? A Re-Assessment

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Abstract

Matthew Novenson has added new arguments to the view that the interlocutor in Rom 2:17 is a gentile calling himself a Jew. The critique found in Rom 1–2 is of a very different kind than the one about Jews and the gospel in chapters 9–11. Hence, the “Jew” in 2:17 is not the same as the Jews in chapters 9–11. This article looks critically into these arguments, claiming that 3:9 is a reference, not to Scripture, but to what Paul has stated earlier in Romans, which then included Jews already in chapter 2. Chapters 1–2 and 9–11 cannot be separated in the way done by Novenson. A web of connecting links between these different parts of the letter is worked out to demonstrate a fundamental connection. Finally, it is argued that the introduction of a gentile interlocutor in 2:17 creates new problems for understanding 1:18–3:20 within Romans.

Keywords

Scripture, Sin, Jews, Diatribe

1. Introduction

Matthew V. Novenson has recently released a collection of previously published articles, indeed a readable and highly commended volume.¹ One of the most important, and I would say innovative contributions, is his discussion on Rom 2:17, entitled “The Self-Styled Jew of Romans 2 and the actual Jews of Romans

¹ Matthew V. Novenson, *Paul, Then and Now* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022).

9–11.”² Novenson’s comparison between these two passages in Romans advances the discussion and deserves further attention. What Paul in Rom 2:17 and the following verses holds against “you who call yourself a Jew” finds, according to Novenson, no corroboration in the failure of Paul’s fellow Jews in chapters 9–11. The transgressions of the law in the first case are replaced by failure to receive the gospel in the latter:

The self-styled Jew, like, or perhaps as, the presumptuous person introduced in Rom 2:1, is guilty of gross infractions of the law despite his evident busyness exhorting other people to obey it. The Jews of Rom 9–11 (and Rom 3:3) come in for criticism, but not at all in the same way.... There is nothing at all about transgression in Rom 9–11.³

Hence, there are in Romans “Jews” and Jews, “and the former are not the latter.”⁴ Such discrepancy has been noted by other scholars previous to Novenson, but no one has to my mind observed this so pointedly.⁵ He considers the self-styled Jew a gentile, not a Jew, which has been, and still is the more commonly accepted reading, albeit not as evident as before.

Novenson’s reading of Romans deserves to be scrutinized, particularly the way he relates 2:17 in context and chapters 9–11, or rather how he disconnects the two. To this belongs also how Rom 3:9 and the following verses pertain to his understanding of who the self-styled “Jew” in 2:17 is. The scholarly arguments in favor of a gentile interlocutor found its full expression in the 2016 volume *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans*.⁶

My question is simply this: Is the hypothesis of a Gentile interlocutor persuasive in the context of the letter as a whole? My argument will focus on the relationship between Rom 3:9 and the following catena of scriptural passages. Furthermore, Novenson’s view that Rom 9–11 voices criticisms categorically

² Novenson, *Paul*, 91–117; previously published in *The So-Called Jew in Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Rafael Rodriguez and Matthew Thiessen (Minneapolis: Fortress 2016), 133–161.

³ Novenson, *Paul*, 116–117.

⁴ Novenson, *Paul*, 117.

⁵ See Charles K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed. (BNTC; London: Black, 1991), 53; Stanley Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 156.

⁶ See note 2 above.

different from chapter 2 will be nuanced by working out links, both in vocabulary and ideas, between these two parts of Romans.⁷ Finally, I will comment on the role of the second-person plural “you” in 2:24, an issue not addressed by Novenson.

The Icelandic scholar Runar M. Thorsteinsson’s 2003 monograph paved the way for new ways to understand Romans, and also opened up promising possibilities for how to portray Paul’s theology.⁸ In his exegesis of Rom 2, Novenson stands on the shoulders Thorsteinsson, adding, in fact, to his argument. Thorsteinsson argues that the rhetorical interlocutor throughout Romans 2 is not an actual Jew, but a gentile Judaizer. Thorsteinsson’s exegesis

⁷ Lionel J. Windsor, “The Named Jew and the Name of God: The Argument of Romans 2:17–29,” *NovT* 63 (2021): 229–248. He argues that Paul charges a fictive Jewish teacher of the kind Josephus tells about in *Ant.* 18.81–84, a scandalous teacher. Windsor argues that ἐπνομαζῆ is not reflexive, but passive, and should be rendered “you are [customarily] called,” which is a reference to public reputation. Paul deliberately evokes the ideal of a Jewish teacher whose instruction is Torah-based, and who purports to be able to address and put right the human sinfulness laid out previously in Romans. Bad reputation and public recognition, going back to the incident found in Josephus, is not conducive to bring gentiles to praise God’s name. This interesting suggestion suffers in my view from excessive use of sources external to Romans. Windsor is, therefore, led to argue that Rom 2:17–29 is not about the eschatological status of the interlocutor, but about lack of public recognition and the ineffectiveness of the Jewish teacher. Thus, Rom 3:1 is not about salvific advantage for Jews, as in Rom 9–11, but about how this fictive interlocutor may after all bring about praise for God’s name among gentiles. My question is this: if Paul’s point in 2:17–29 is to prove the ineffectiveness of Jewish teachers in dealing with human sinfulness, as claimed by Windsor, what sense does it then make to raise the question in 3:1 at all? That question moves in another direction. According to Windsor, this teacher stands in contrast to Paul who through his gospel is the only option for dealing with the problem of human sin uncovered in the previous parts of Romans. Viewed from how this Romans passage ends, speaking about all humans being accountable to God, Windsor’s exegesis appears, if not impossible, still too sophisticated to be convincing. The accountability of any exegete of Romans is primarily to *this* text. All fascinating and enlightening suggestions inspired by external sources, find here their true test.

⁸ Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography* (ConBNT 40; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003), 196–234. For a critique, see, e.g., Karl Olav Sandnes, *Paul Perceived: An Interactionist Perspective on Paul and the Law* (WUNT 412; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 28–30, 100–104.

has become a building-block in what is nowadays labelled Paul within Judaism.⁹ His reading has served to substantiate the claim that Romans is not addressed to Jews at all. Novenson has aptly presented this view: Paul within Judaism

rejects the idea that Paul's polemics were aimed at his ancestral religion in any aspect.... For these interpreters, Paul stands entirely *within* Judaism and not in any respect *against* Judaism. By their lights, the 'justification from works of law' that Paul rejects is only a possible course of action for *gentiles*. On Judaism itself, Paul has nothing to say.¹⁰

Thorsteinsson's and Novenson's understanding of Rom 2:17 has come to buttress the view that what Paul says pertains to gentiles only.¹¹

2. The Relationship Between Romans 3:9 and the Scriptural Catena

Novenson as well as Thorsteinsson find in Rom 3:9 supportive evidence for excluding actual Jews from 2:17. The traditional translation goes like this: "... No, not at all, for we have already charged (*προηγησάμεθα*) that all, both Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin" (NRSVue).¹² This rendering interprets "we" as referring to Paul himself, in analogy with Rom 1:5 where his apostolic ministry is spoken of in the first-person plural (*ἐλάβομεν*). The temporal aspect in *προηγησάμεθα* then refers to what Paul has already written in the epistle, which

⁹ See, e.g., William S. Campbell, *Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity* (LNTS 322; London: T&T Clark, 2006), 105–109; Matthew Thiessen, "Paul's Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Rom 2:17–29," *NovT* 56 (2014): 373–391; Rafael Rodriguez, *If You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014). Anders Runesson, *Judaism for Gentiles: Reading Paul Beyond the Parting of the Ways Paradigm* (WUNT 494; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022), 33–40, where Thorsteinsson's work is seen as "a seminal study contributing to this interpretive trajectory." Runesson rightly points out that Thorsteinsson's study does not explicitly label his work as Paul within Judaism.

¹⁰ Novenson, *Paul*, 87; see also Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 54–59.

¹¹ Magnus Zetterholm, "The Non-Jewish Interlocutor in Romans 2:17 and the Salvation of the Nations: Contextualizing Romans 1:18–32," in *The So-Called Jew*, 39–58, especially pp. 41–43, 52–53, 58.

¹² For critical questions regarding this translation, see Nils Alstrup Dahl, "Romans 3:9: Text and Meaning," in *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett*, ed. M. D. Hooker and S. G. Wilson (London: SPCK, 1982), 184–204.

includes the immediately preceding argument indicting Jews, probably from 2:1 on, but most clearly so in 2:17. In contrast to this, Novenson's reading of 2:17 follows Thorsteinsson closely, but adds a significant new perspective by bringing a comparison with the actual Jews in Romans 9–11 into the picture (see below). Pace the traditional reading rendered above, Novenson says:

On my reading, however, Paul has not in fact indicted the Jews in Rom 2. How, then, can he say *προητιασάμεθα*? The answer lies in what follows, to wit: a litany of scripture citations presenting a kaleidoscope of impiety: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who comprehends, no one who seeks after God, and so on' (Rom 3:10–18). ... In other words, it is the sacred books of old, not Paul himself in the preceding paragraph, that 'previously charged' the Jews with being under sin.¹³

Galatians 3:22 (*ἀλλὰ συνέκλεισεν ἡ γραφή τὰ πάντα ὑπὸ ἁμαρτίαν*) is seen as warranting this view. The temporal aspect in *προητιασάμεθα* refers to what Scripture has previously stated, which is then laid out in the verses following from v. 10 on, not to what Paul has already claimed in the letter. Thus, Novenson subscribes to Thorsteinsson's conclusion regarding this passage: "In fact, it is first with these citations that the charge of 'universal sinfulness' is explicitly announced."¹⁴ Thorsteinsson's treatment of 3:9 is, in light of the importance attributed to it, surprisingly short, hardly paying attention to possible objections. Novenson gives additional support, but the relationship between *προητιασάμεθα* and *καθὼς γέγραπται* in v. 10 is not sufficiently accounted for. Novenson assumes that the two are nearly identical. The temporal aspect as well as the plural "we" in *προητιασάμεθα* is hardly accounted for. To say, as Novenson does, that 3:9 cannot militate against a certain reading of 2:17 is a circular argument, as precisely that verse is the disputed issue here.

The first issue to be addressed is the role usually given to *καθὼς γέγραπται* in Romans. In Novenson's argument the citations from Scripture starting in 3:10 introduce something not yet addressed by Paul. Thus, *προητιασάμεθα* refers not to the preceding, but to the citations which follow, implying that Scripture has

¹³ Novenson, *Paul*, 108.

¹⁴ Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 235.

stated this already.¹⁵ According to James D. G. Dunn, *καθώς γέγραπται* “is used as a formula to introduce quotations from the OT—not least in Romans, and consistently as an appeal to Scripture to document or prove an assertion just made.”¹⁶ Hence, with *καθώς γέγραπται* Paul turns to Scripture to further substantiate with divine approval what he has already stated in this epistle. The relevant key texts are the following: Rom 1:17; 2:24; 3:4; 4:17; 8:36; 9:13, 22; 10:15; 11:8, 26; 15:3, 9, 21. This means that Paul turns to Scripture, reinforcing what has already been put forward in his own words, albeit his words may be shaped in accordance with the scriptural texts added to his argument. It may therefore sometimes be difficult to distinguish between Paul’s own words and the scriptural sayings he draws on. This may be illustrated by Rom 1:16–17. Paul begins in 1:16 by giving a short summary of the gospel, focusing on its salvific power for both Jew and Greek. Already in 1:16 the keyword “faith” is introduced, and in 1:17a, Paul makes a connection between faith and righteousness, which will later prove crucial for the argument of Romans. Having already established his basic case in 1:16–17a, and also key terms and concepts upon which that case rests, Paul turns to Scripture. The dictum found in Hab 2:4 confirms the role of faith (*πίστις*) urged by Paul in v. 17a: “For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.” Two keywords (*δίκαιος* and *πίστις*) from Hab 2:4 figure prominently in Paul’s own words, thus summarizing the statement Paul made in the previous verse.

The affirming role of *καθώς γέγραπται* is there throughout these texts. Two examples suffice to make my point, Rom 11:26 and 15:9. The first case, regardless of how *καὶ οὕτως* is interpreted,¹⁷ is Paul’s hope about Israel being saved (*πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται*), which finds support in Isa 59:20–21 and 27:9, introduced with *καθώς γέγραπται*. It is, of course, possible to say here that Paul’s hope is culled from the Scriptures, but our concern here is not how this hope originated, but on how *καθώς γέγραπται* works in his epistolary presentation. Worthy of notice is that Israel’s need for salvation is here described in a way strongly reminiscent of Rom 1:18–3:20: *ἀποστρέψει ἀσεβείας ἀπὸ Ἰακώβ* and *ἀφέλωμαι τὰς ἀμαρτίας αὐτῶν*. This observation is not to be overlooked and will be

¹⁵ Joshua D. Garroay, “Paul’s Gentile Interlocutor in Romans 3:1–20,” in *The So-Called Jew*, 85–100, argues that Paul refers to something he has spoken on a previous occasion. For a critique, see Sandnes, *Paul*, 103–104. Garroay’s interpretation is interesting as it indicates that the plural “we” involved in the verb is a problem here; see later.

¹⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (WBC 38A; Dallas: Word, 1988), 44, cf. 115.

¹⁷ Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer (Teilband 2: Röm 9–16)* (EKK VI/2; Ostfildern and Göttingen: Patmos and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019), 207–210.

elaborated below. In the second case, 15:9, Christ is said to have become a servant for the Jews, to confirm the promises given to the fathers. But gentiles will also join in praising the God of Israel. To prove this last point, *καθὼς γέγραπται* introduces Ps 17:49 LXX (= 2 Sam 22:50): “Therefore I will confess you among the gentiles and sing praises to your name.” Then follows a catena of biblical passages where *ἔθνη* and words for praise are found. The texts convey together Paul’s main point here, namely, that the gentiles will join in giving praise to Israel’s God. The plural *ἐν ἔθνεσιν* in the quotation, and also in all quotations making up the catena, is identical with Paul’s *τὰ ἔθνη* in v. 9a, thus emphasizing how Paul’s own words find reinforcement in Scripture.

This questions the view that *προηγησάμεθα* points to Scripture itself, as it leaves this verb practically redundant in Paul’s text. What does this bring to the relationship between Rom 3:9 and the catena then? According to Thorsteinsson and Novenson, there is no previous assertion in 3:9 to be confirmed, since 3:9 is already a paraphrase of the catena of passages about sinfulness. Thus, the role of *καθὼς γέγραπται* as confirming what has already been stated, is blurred.

What does all this bring to our understanding of Rom 3:9–10 then? These observations on how *καθὼς γέγραπται* is used in Romans are not conclusive evidence against Novenson’s interpretation. Nonetheless, it implies that his interpretation of 3:9–10, where this phrase introduces something which is new to the epistolary context, is irregular in Romans. The phrase *καθὼς γέγραπται* usually points backward to what has just been said, confirming, supporting, or backing an assertion already made. The confirmatory role of *καθὼς γέγραπται* is blurred in Thorsteinsson’s and Novenson’s interpretation. One might possibly say that Rom 3:9 constitutes Paul’s own words, shaped by Scripture, which then in 3:10–18 find scriptural corroboration, but there are no terminological links established between vv. 9 and 10, although *πάντας ὑφ’ ἁμαρτίαν εἶναι* (see also *πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον* in 3:23) leads naturally to *οὐκ ἔστιν/οὐδὲ εἷς*. The emphasis on Jews and Greeks in 3:9 definitely points backward to 1:14, 16 and 2:9–12 where the two are mentioned. The scriptural catena which follows gives no terminological substantiation for including “Jews and Greeks” in 3:9. This is found only in the preceding. Thus, 3:9 picks up on what Paul has already established in his argument, which includes indictments on Jews, and then 3:10–18 affirms this by a catena of biblical texts.

My hesitation regarding Novenson on this point finds further affirmation in the first-person plural “we” in *προηγησάμεθα*. According to

Novenson, “we” refers to and introduces scriptural evidence.¹⁸ Regardless of how the authorial “we” is interpreted, it is unusual for Paul to introduce Scripture in this way. A possible analogy may be found in Rom 4:9: “Is this blessing, then, pronounced only on the circumcised or also on the uncircumcised? We say (λέγομεν γάρ) ‘Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.’” Romans 4:9 introduces a new step in the argument, picking up on the first-person plural in v. 1: “What are we to say (ἐροῦμεν)?” Whether Abraham was circumcised or not at the time God addressed him in Gen 15:6 allows for certain implications to be gleaned from that text. It is not Scripture as such, but clearly Paul’s interpretation of it which is at stake here. Thus, λέγομεν refers not to the Scriptural text itself, but to its relevance for the question v. 1 has already raised in “we” form.¹⁹

Romans 15:4 may help illustrate the distinction between “we” and Scripture. Paul says that what Scripture has previously stated (προεγράφη) (Ps 68:10 LXX) “was written for our instruction.” Paul thus distinguishes between Scripture and “we,” as he does also in 1 Cor 10. There is a past in the Scripture which is distinguished from present “we”: “These things happened to them to serve as an example, and they were written down (ἐγράφη) to instruct us, on whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor 10:11). Novenson’s reading of 3:9 confuses this by having a first-person plural introducing Scripture. If “we” here refers to Scripture, it is the only example of this in Paul.

3. A Web of Connecting Links

Novenson argues that the actual Jews in Rom 9–11 come in for criticism, but of a very different kind than the one we find in chapter 2: “But the disobedience with which Paul charges Israel is of a very particular sort. It is neither gross moral turpitude, as in Rom 1–2, nor a perverse use of the law for either egoistic or jingoistic ends.”²⁰ They are charged with unbelief, as they turned their back to Paul’s gospel. The differences are, according to Novenson, “striking.”²¹ Novenson is right in pointing out that disbelief in their Messiah is at the center

¹⁸ Likewise, Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 236: “Thus, the words ‘for we have previously charged’ in 3:9 concern not Paul’s previous discussion in his letter but charges already made by scripture, examples of which are the given by Paul in the following verses.”

¹⁹ Thus, also Samuel Byrskog, *Romarbrevet 1–8* (KNT; Stockholm: EFS forlaget, 2006), 86.

²⁰ Novenson, *Paul*, 115.

²¹ Novenson, *Paul*, 116.

of Rom 9–11, but there is more to be said. The Jews in Rom 9–11 are not exempt from Paul’s theology of sin, as presented in 1:18–3:20. The arguments for this depend on observations suggesting that 1:18–3:20 and chapters 9–11 are entangled in a web of terms that connect the two precisely when it comes to the criticism being voiced in both passages. This is relevant since Novenson argues that the two are to be seen separately.

Judged from how Rom 1:18–3:20 is summarized, this section aims at including both Gentiles and Jews under the power of sin.²² The section renders a theological view on fallen humanity. Already in the opening statement of 1:18–3:20 ἀνθρώπος is a key figure. Two observations suggest a reference to all humanity. In Rom 2:9 this noun is defined explicitly as including both Jews and gentiles, and this section of Romans ends up saying that every mouth (πάν στόμα) will be silenced, and the whole world (πᾶς ὁ κόσμος) will be held accountable to God; in short, πᾶσα σὰρξ (3:19–20) is included, or as stated in 3:22b–23: “there is no distinction, since all have sinned.” The aim of this part of Romans is intended precisely to prepare for that conclusion, which also anticipates 5:12–21 where Adam and sin are joined.²³

The difference Novenson urges between Rom 1–2 and 3:10–18 is unconvincing to me, as he says that only the latter part is relevant for the Jews. If 3:10–18 is about real Jews, and not just self-styled Jews, it follows that Jews are also subject to the kind of criticism that Paul develops within 1:18–3:20. They are not just guilty of disbelief or lack of understanding. It is thus difficult to claim that Paul limits his criticism of his fellow Jews to cognitive failures. If Rom 3:10–20 also includes Jews, as stated by Novenson, the same striking difference vis-à-vis chapters 9–11, as claimed for chapters 1–2, comes into view. In other words, regardless of how the interlocutor in 2:17 is understood, the discrepancy vis-à-vis Rom 9–11 is still there by way of 3:10–18. This problem is in my view not accounted for in Novenson’s contribution.

There are several links between Rom 3:10–18 and the preceding part of this section in Romans. The following will work out terminological links and common motifs that tie in not only 3:10–18 with 1:18–3:20 but chapters 9–11 as

²² See Friedrich Wilhelm Horn, “Götzensdiener, Tempelräuber und Betrüger: Polemik gegen Heiden, Juden und Judenchristen im Römerbrief,” in *Polemik in der fruhchristlichen Literatur: Texte und Kontexte*, ed. O. Wischmeier and L. Scornaienchi (BZNW 170; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 209–232.

²³ See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Revelation of Human Captivity: An Exegesis of Romans 1,18–32,” in *God’s Power for Salvation: Romans 1,1–5,11*, ed. Cilliers Breitenbach (Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum 23; Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 43–59.

well.²⁴ The web of connections to be uncovered questions Novenson's claim that chapters 9–11 are set apart from this previous text in Romans. This web also questions separating 3:10–18 from 1:18–3:20, as though Jews are not included before 3:9.

Romans 1:18–3:20 is introduced with key words *ἀσέβεια* and *ἀδικία*, where the latter is seen as suppressing truth (*ἀλήθεια*; see also 2:8, 20). The noun *ἀδικία* (see also 1:29; 2:8) finds a correspondence in 3:10 (*οὐκ ἔστιν δίκαιος*), and although *ἀλήθεια* and cognates do not appear in the catena given in chapter 3, the motif of defeating truth is precisely what is conveyed by the biblical texts collected in 3:10–18. We noticed already that *ἀσέβεια* figures in the citation Paul leans on when he talks about all Israel being saved (11:26). Thus, already from the opening of 1:18–3:20 a web reaching even into chapters 9–11 is indicated. The issue of knowledge and understanding is prominent in this section (1:19, 21, 28, 32–32, 34; 2:4, 18, 20) and it is picked up in 3:11 (*οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ συνίων*) and 3:17 (*οὐκ ἔγνωσαν*). Romans 1:18–3:20 is closed by a statement about knowledge of sin (*ἐπίγνωσις ἁμαρτίας*; 3:20). This knowledge comes through the law, according to Paul, thus implying that his fellow Jews, who have the Torah, were supposed to know.

As for the catalogue of vices in Rom 1:29–30, it is worth noticing that *δόλος* figures as a verb in 3:13 as well (*ἐδολιοῦσαν*). Furthermore *κατάλαλος*, slanderous, finds its equivalent in the role given to words, tongue, and mouth in 3:13–14: “they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of vipers is under their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” In the catalogue, figures also *ἀπείθεια*: *γονεῦσιν ἀπειθεῖς*, a hint at the decalogue (cf. 2:21–22), and a term found also in 2:8. The cognates of this adjective are crucial when Paul in 10:21 quotes Isa 65:2 LXX about “disobedient” Israel (*πρὸς λαὸν ἀπειθοῦντα*). This motif is found also in 10:3 (*οὐχ ὑπετάγησαν*) and 11:20 and 23 (*ἀπιστία*). The citation in 10:21 shapes the language with which Paul brings his treatise on Israel in Romans to an end: “Just as you were once disobedient to God (*ἠπειθήσατε τῷ θεῷ*) but have now received mercy because of their disobedience (*τῇ τούτων ἀπειθείᾳ*), so also they have now been disobedient (*ἠπειθήσαν*) in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience (*συνέκλεισεν γὰρ ὁ θεὸς τοὺς πάντας*²⁵ *εἰς ἀπειθειαν*) so that he may be

²⁴ Gaventa, “Human Captivity,” 44, says that three motifs from 1:18–32 prove important in the remainder of the letter, i.e., the extent of sin, worship, and epistemology (knowledge).

²⁵ Some mss, probably including P46, have neuter (*τὰ πάντα*) here.

merciful to all” (11:30–32). Worth observing here is, of course, that *ἀπείθεια* is defined universally, being applied to both gentiles and Jews. Here is a mutual dependence, based on a disobedience which characterizes both gentiles and Jews. The motif of hardening which is important in 11:7–10, picking up on 9:17–23, is anticipated in 2:5 (“But by your hard and impenitent heart...; *κατὰ δὲ τὴν σκληρότητά σου καὶ ἀμετανόητον καρδίαν*”).

A common accusation against gentiles from a Jewish perspective is of idolatry (Wis 11–15; 1 Thess 1:9–10; 1 Cor 12:1–2), which also figures prominently in 1:18–3:20, especially in 1:19–25, but even in 2:22: “You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?”²⁶ This is, of course, one of the reasons that might suggest a gentile, and not a Jewish, interlocutor in 2:17. As I have stated above, I think this misses out on the surprising and exaggerated nature of the rhetoric in 1:18–3:20.²⁷ Seen in light of Paul’s use of the Golden Calf tradition in 1 Cor 10:7 this move is not surprising from a scriptural point of view either.²⁸ Furthermore, the idolatry-blame is found also in 11:2–4, taken from 1 Kgs 19. This is a pivotal story in biblical tradition about Israel and Baal.²⁹ Although Paul’s primary aim in citing from 1 Kgs 19 is to argue for his concept of a

²⁶ According to Jens Schröter, “Juden und Heiden in Römer 2: Röm 2,1–29 innerhalb der Argumentation von 1,18–3,20,” in *God’s Power*, 87–88, Paul “bewegt sich hier also innerhalb allgemeiner ethischer Begrifflichkeit zur Kennzeichnung schändlicher Verhaltens.”

²⁷ See Sandnes, *Paul*, 101–102, for the intended chocking effect of this rhetoric. Views usually resonating in texts about pagans come into wider use due to the universalizing perspective of this passage. Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *God, Grace, and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon and Paul’s Letter to the Romans: Texts in Conversation* (NovTSup 152; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 93–96, says that “[functionally], then, the indictment of Romans 1.18–32 becomes, at last retroactively, an indictment of the Jew as much as the Gentile” (p. 95). The rhetorical move is to “eliminate the self-imposed distance between the judge and the other,” thereby subjecting all to the same condemnation. Linebaugh’s argument is that while the polemic in Wis 13–15 serves to reinforce the distinction between Jew and gentiles, Paul’s rhetoric reworks this, to portray humankind as united in being sinners; see also Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *The Word of the Cross: Reading Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 97–122.

²⁸ Karl Olav Sandnes, *Belly and Body in the Pauline Epistles* (SNTSMS 120; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 199–210; see also Gaventa, “Human Captivity,” 50, who points to Ps 105:20 LXX and says that “a subtle irony emerges, then, as the ‘gentile problem’ of idolatry is cast in language that also implicates Israel, laying the groundwork for 2:1–3:9.”

²⁹ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 462–463, 545.

remnant among the people (λείμμα), he does remind his readers of Israel's past involvement with a sin which is elsewhere especially connected with gentiles.

Novenson points out rightly that Paul in Rom 9–11 blames the Jews for failing to recognize the Messiah and the gospel. But this failure is part of the issue of right worship and knowledge which permeates chapters 1–2 in this letter. In his 1989 article, “Cognitio Dei im Römerbrief,” Ernst Baasland works out in detail how the theme and terms for knowledge and insight permeate Romans.³⁰ He argues that Rom 1:18–3:20 is to be seen against the backdrop of how the prophets of Israel charged the people for lacking in knowledge:

Um Röm 1,18–3,20 als Ganzes erklären zu können, hätten wir fast die gesamte Gerichtsverkündigung der Propheten heranziehen müssen. Wir begrenzen uns auf diejenigen Propheten-Texte, in denen die Erkenntnis-Thematik in der Verkündigung auftaucht, besonders: Hos 4,1–3. 6–9; 6,5–7; Jer 2,5–12. 29–36a; 4,19–26; 8,4–13; 9,2–9; Jes 1,2–4; 40,12–31; 43,8. 13; Mi 6,1–9; vgl. auch Dtn 32; Ps 50 wie auch die Mahnungen/Trost-Aussagen: Jer 4,4f; 9,23ff.³¹

Baasland argues that this is picked up again in chapters 9–11, and that Paul in doing so follows in the wake of prophetic traditions in the Jewish Scriptures. Prophetic critique of Israel is indeed a “within Judaism” phenomenon, not restricted to the Hebrew Bible, but also present in other relevant Jewish literature such as Josephus and Qumran.

“Not Seeking God” (οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ ἐκζητῶν τὸν θεόν; Rom 3:11) is a motif also in 11:7 (ἐπιζητεῖ Ἰσραήλ; cf. 9:31). The difference is that Israel seeks God but without proper understanding. Lack of appropriate knowledge is important in Paul's presentation of the actual Jews in chapters 9–11, stated explicitly in 10:2–3: “For I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not based on knowledge (οὐ κατ' ἐπίγνωσιν). Not knowing (ἀγνοοῦντες) the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness.” To this belongs also 10:19: “Again I ask, did Israel not understand (οὐκ ἔγνω)?” A negative answer may here be expected, in line with

³⁰ Ernst Baasland, “Cognitio Dei in Römerbrief,” *SNTSU* Serie A 14 (1989): 185–218.

³¹ Baasland, “Cognitio,” 199.

the logic of 10:2–3 above.³² However, the grammar (BDF §427.2) is in favor of an affirmative answer, which then adds a perspective to 10:2–3. It is possibly a flashback to Rom 3:2 (ἐπιστεύθησαν τὰ λόγια τοῦ θεοῦ). There is a notion here of the Jews' advantage in having been entrusted Scripture, which then exacerbates the fact that Paul's own people know neither what nor whom the Scripture was really about.³³

I have already stated that Rom 11:26 with emphasis on ἀσέβεια and ἁμαρτία resonates well with 1:18–3:20, and in such a way that the differences between the criticism voiced in these passages are not as striking as claimed by Novenson. This observation takes us to the role of Abraham in Romans, an issue far beyond what we can unfold here. Abraham is in Rom 4:5 and 5:6 presented as ἀσεβής, and the immediate context of 4:5 defines this further as requiring forgiveness: “Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven (ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι) and whose sins are covered (ἐπεκαλύφθησαν αἱ ἁμαρτίαι). Blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin (οὐ μὴ λογίσῃται κύριος ἁμαρτίαν)” (4:7–8). This suggests that the tradition of Abraham's pagan past as an idolater (Jub. 12; Apoc. Ab. 1–8) is here developed and altered in light of 1:18–3:20.³⁴ What matters here is that Abraham, in being described thusly, is linked to 1:18–3:20.

This detailed and tedious list of verses is the only way to lay out the web in which Rom 3:10–18 is connected to 1:18–3:8, and also that chapters 9–11 are embedded in this web. Both 3:10–18 and chapters 9–11 represent to Paul a development of the question of sinfulness. This conclusion finds corroboration in the fact that Israel will find salvation from their sins (ὅταν ἀφέλωμαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν; 11:27). Finally, Novenson makes a distinction between sin as “empirically demonstrable,” applied to gentiles and found in Rom 1:18–32 and 2:1–29, and sin “as known from the testimony of the law, that is to say, from scripture rather than experience.”³⁵ I find this too schematic and simple to catch the rhetoric of Paul's discourse on sin in Romans. Somehow, sin is empirical to all, be they gentiles or Jews, as death reigns (Rom 5:12–21), a fundamental fact in Paul's reasoning about the power of sin. Furthermore, Rom 9–11 is not untouched by Paul's own mission and the experiences of opposition he faced from Jews as well

³² See the arguments by Otfried Hofius, *Paulusstudien* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 176; Baasland, “Cognitio,” 211.

³³ Predrag Dragutinović, “The Advantage of Having the Scriptures: An Exegesis of Romans 3,1–20,2” in *God's Power*, 97–115, at 113–115.

³⁴ Karl Olav Sandnes, “Reading Romans 4 Backwards: Abraham Mirrored in His σπέρμα, Isaac,” *ZNW* 115 (2024): 69–89.

³⁵ Novenson, *Paul*, 109.

(2 Cor 11:24), and the view on sin in chapters 1–2 is not only empirically demonstrable, but intended to give a theological perspective as well.

4. Romans 3:1, the Advantage of the Jew, vis-à-vis a Gentile Interlocutor in 2:17–29

Novenson connects the Jew in Rom 3:1–3 with the actual Jews in chapters 9–11, which is hardly a contested position. The argument in chap. 3 breaks off and is picked up in chapter 9. However, in Novenson’s argument more is at stake. The Jews implied in 3:1–3 are separated from the preceding paragraph in 2:17, as 3:1–9 is about Jews, not “Jews” as in 2:17. A relevant question to present is the following: what prompts a question about the prerogatives of Jews in precisely this context? As Paul uses the diatribe-style elsewhere, *τί οὖν* hardly introduces a new section cut loose from the preceding. Central to the diatribe-style are questions that are objections to positions made. With that in view, *τί οὖν* has most likely a reference to the preceding. This may be exemplified by Rom 6:1 which follows from the dictum in 5:20–21 about abundant grace depending on increase of sin. Likewise, in Rom 7:7 the diatribe question (“What then are we to say? That the law is sin?”) picks up on the previous verse about being released from the law. In other words, the diatribe style presents or echoes a possible objection or inference arising from the preceding argument. According to Stanley K. Stowers, the questions of the diatribe involve objections and false conclusions that are reactions “to the elements of argumentation and persuasion which precede them in a great variety of ways.”³⁶ Given what 2:17–29 has stated, what is then the prerogative, if any, for the Jews? Thusly, 3:1–9 is introduced. Novenson would probably not disagree on this formal point.

However, if Rom 2:17–29 is not about Jews, but a gentile who claims to be a Jew, and the issue at stake in 2:25–29 concerns circumcision, there is a need to think this through. It would still make sense to ask about the advantage of circumcision, as does 3:1b. Leaning on Matthew Thiessen,³⁷ Novenson argues that Paul here refers to legislation on circumcision, which applies strictly to Jews, about a rite to occur on the eighth day. Hence, the interlocutor “becomes

³⁶ Stanley Kent Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (SBLDS 57; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981), 143; see pp. 119–154 on objections and false conclusions in the diatribe. See also Thomas Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 88–98, 118–123; Sandnes, *Paul Perceived*, 97–99.

³⁷ Thiessen, “Paul’s Argument.”

a transgressor of the law precisely through, not in spite of his circumcision. By undergoing circumcision, he violates the circumcision commandment.”³⁸ Perhaps, Paul was, says Novenson, a Jew who held this position found in, e.g., Jubilees. Thus, the aim of 2:25–29 is to keep gentiles like the interlocutor away from circumcision. It seems to me that the verbs *πράσσειν* and *φυλάσσειν* used here link up with *ἐργάζεσθαι* in 2:10 and the distinction between “hearers” and “doers” of the law in 2:13 (see below), thus indicating another issue than a “Galatian-like situation” of gentile circumcision. Be this as it may; my point is that if 2:25–29 embarks on a debate on circumcision legislation, this leaves the question in 3:1a about the advantage of the Jews hanging in the air. Paul asks in 3:1 about *Jews* and circumcision. That needs to be pinpointed. The question of the advantage for the Jews makes less sense if the implied addressee is a gentile and the issue is about circumcision for gentiles. Against a backdrop where the text is about a gentile and circumcision, the question of advantage for Jews makes less sense.

5. Two Additional Observations

I finally, turn to two observations which are not in themselves decisive with regard to how 2:17 is to be interpreted, but which, nonetheless, make a smoother reading if the interlocutor is a Jew.

5.1. *Romans 2:24: “The name of God is blasphemed among the gentiles because of you”*

This citation from Isa 52:5 (cf. Ezek 36:17–23) is not in any way conclusive regarding the identity of the interlocutor in Rom 2:17, but it is still worthy of notice.³⁹ Paul depends on LXX, as the Hebrew text does not have “among the nations (*ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν*).” In its context, in both Hebrew and LXX, this is not an indictment against Jews, but refers to Israel being oppressed by the nations, in captivity. This makes God appear powerless, thus paving the way for God’s name being blasphemed, a topic which is prominent in, e.g., 4 Ezra: “we pass from the world like locusts. And our life is like a mist, and we are not worthy to obtain mercy. But what will he do for his name, by which we are called? It is about these things that I have asked?” (4:24–25; cf. 5:28–30). It is the unfortunate situation of the Jews which caused the blasphemy. The Romans application,

³⁸ Novenson, *Paul*, 105.

³⁹ See Christopher Stanley, *The Rhetoric of Quotations in the Letters of Paul* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 145–150.

however, blames the transgressions of the interlocutor for God's name being blasphemed, summarizing the indictment found in the passage. According to Thorsteinsson, these changes to the original context are due to Paul who does not indict Jews at all, but a gentile interlocutor.⁴⁰ This is to me an odd solution, as it implies that gentiles who claim to be Jews are accused for gentiles blaspheming God's name, thus making δι' ὑμᾶς a reference to gentiles causing other gentiles to blaspheme God's name. This is not impossible, but a less likely solution.

The Ezekiel-text involved has the motif of Israel causing God's name to be blasphemed. In a context where their idolatry and uncleanness prevail, "their way (ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ αὐτῶν)" is mentioned thrice. To Paul, this was an obvious reference to lifestyle or conduct measured by the standards of the law.⁴¹ Furthermore, "according to their way" (κατὰ τὴν ὁδὸν αὐτῶν) appears in tandem with κατὰ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν αὐτῶν (Ezek 36:19). Thus, this passage fits how Isa 52 is used in Paul's context. Conflated with Ezek 36, which voices a well-known prophetic tradition of Israel causing pagan blasphemy (T. Naph. 8:1; cf. Matt 5:16), it fits nicely the context, albeit it is not evidently decisive for the question who "the Jew" is in 2:17. However, in a context where Paul argues that both Jews and gentiles are under the power of sin (Rom 2:9–11; 3:9), it would be odd for Paul to blame a gentile interlocutor for how gentiles viewed God's name. The fact that there is sufficient historical grounds for imagining a gentile interlocutor,⁴² does not do away with the oddity of such an interpretation. Worthy of notice is also that the second-person singular from 2:17 is kept rhetorically throughout to v. 23, while in v. 24 there is a plural (δι' ὑμᾶς). This change is due, not only to the quotation from LXX, but also to the fact that Paul has a group of people in mind. This fits more naturally with Jews than with gentile sympathizers.

The self-claimed presentation of the interlocutor has one phrase in which reverberates biblical language: φῶς τῶν ἐν σκότει (Rom 2:19). This language is derived from Isa 42:6–7 and 49:6, and is about Israel's role vis-à-vis the nations. Hence, this vocabulary is at home in conversion contexts (Jos. Asen.

⁴⁰ Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 218–221. Novenson does not comment on the role of this citation.

⁴¹ See Karin Finsterbusch, *Die Thora als Lebensweisung für Heidenchristen: Studien zur Bedeutung der Thora für die paulinische Ethik* (SUNT 20; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 108–119; cf. *halak* which in Hebrew tradition may be used with reference to ethical conduct.

⁴² As demonstrated by Novenson, *Paul*, 99–102.

6:2; 8:9; 15:12; Philo, *Spec.* 1.54; *Virt.* 179; Acts 26:18).⁴³ This is not conclusive for the question of who the interlocutor is since the motif is also at home in Matthew's portrayal of Pharisees (Matt 15:14; cf. 23:16, 24). Nonetheless, this phraseology makes perfect sense if Paul has in mind a Jewish interlocutor.

5.2. Jew or "Jew" in Romans 2:25–29

This passage is held in the second-person singular ("you") as is Rom 2:17–23, but not v. 24 (see above). This rhetorical second-person singular ties 2:17–29 together into a unit. It is therefore to be expected that Ἰουδαῖος keeps the same meaning throughout this section. Worth noticing therefore is that "you" in 2:27 is contrasted with the uncircumcised. It is, of course, possible, to argue that this refers to circumcised and uncircumcised gentiles (see above).⁴⁴ However, if both ἀκροβυστία and περιτομή here refer to gentiles, this is certainly changed in 4:10–12, 17–18 where such a reading makes no sense. Furthermore, 2:27 is formulated in a way which picks up on 2:12–14 about ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν. Both passages speak from the idea of "knowing God's will or law and doing it." The idea of "knowing God's will and also doing it" runs the gamut of the entire passage of 1:18–3:20 (1:19–21, 32; 2:1–3, 13–14, 18–23) and is explicitly voiced in 2:25–27. The noun φύσις appears in both 2:12–14 and 2:27. The logic is also related: those who from nature are without law or without circumcision observe what is commanded in law or the rite which is a symbol of obedience to it.⁴⁵ Romans 2:14 makes explicit what is not explicit in 2:27, namely that a contrast between Jews and gentiles is implied. This is further corroborated in 2:14 which grows out of 2:9–11 where Jews and gentiles are mentioned together, motivated by God showing no partiality. Hence, another synonymous distinction follows in 2:12: ὅσοι γὰρ ἀνόμως versus ὅσοι ἐν νόμῳ (cf. 3:19: οἱ ἐν τῷ νόμῳ). This finds an analogy in the attitude portrayed rhetorically in 2:18–23, culminating in ὃς ἐν νόμῳ καυχᾶσθαι. These observations are suggestive

⁴³ Reinhard Deichgräber, *Gotteshymnus und Christushymnus in der frühen Christenheit: Untersuchungen zu Form, Sprache und Stil der frühchristlichen Hymnen* (SUNT 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 78–87; Wolter, *Römer*, 194–195.

⁴⁴ So Thorsteinsson, *Interlocutor*, 221–231, and Novenson, *Paul*, follows this. The interlocutor is a gentile throughout 2:17–29. This is not unlike the view that Paul in 1 Cor 7:17–19 addresses an exclusive intra-gentile issue; see Paula Fredriksen, *Paul: The Pagans' Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 107–108; cf. Mark Nanos, *Reading Paul within Judaism: Collected Essays of Mark D. Nanos Vol. 1* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 79–80.

⁴⁵ Jens Schröter, "Juden und Heiden in Römer 2," 83–94.

in pointing to a Jewish interlocutor, even if the identity of the interlocutor rests on observations pointed out elsewhere in my presentation.

Regardless of how Rom 2:28–29 is interpreted, Paul most likely draws on biblical traditions on circumcision of the heart (Lev 26:41; Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4), thus negotiating what a true circumcision is. Against that backdrop it makes perfect sense to speak critically about people “calling” themselves Jews as does 2:17 in my opinion, even if they so are. Thus, the distinction urged in 2:28–29 paves the way for the distinction implied in the “calling oneself” in 2:17.

6. Summary

The question of the identity of the interlocutor in Rom 2:17 is important since it concerns the reading of Romans more generally, and also because it pertains to larger theological questions of Paul’s theology. Novenson’s recent book *Paul Then and Now* (2022) is an opportunity to address this again. He follows in the footsteps of Runar M. Thorsteinsson who in 2003 initiated this debate, by claiming that 2:17 referred to an imagined gentile interlocutor. The present article considers this critically: is this convincing in the context of the letter as a whole? Issues affecting 2:17 are addressed here, such as the reference of προηγιασάμεθα in 3:9 as well as the scriptural catena. The two are not the same, as it seems to Novenson (and Thorsteinsson); rather, 3:8–10 reinforces what Paul has already stated in his own words previously in the letter. Hence, 3:9 assumes a reference to Jews prior to 3:10–18. A Jewish interlocutor makes also the diatribe question in 3:1 about the advantage of a Jew more natural. The reference to uncircumcision and circumcision in 2:25–29 links up with passages earlier in the letter about Jews and gentiles. Romans 9–11 is rightly by Novenson given a special role in the letter, as Israel’s advantage is worked out there. But he overlooks how Paul’s argument even in these chapters is intertwined in themes and terms running throughout 1:18–3:20 as well, one of them being knowledge and insight. It is not true to say, as does Novenson, that the actual Jews in chapters 9–11 are criticized only for turning their back to the gospel. To both Thorsteinsson and Novenson, Jews are exempt from Paul’s presentation of the power of sin in chapters 1–2. This paves the way for a gentile interlocutor in 2:17. Once their view on chapters 1–2 is questioned, the formerly traditional reading of a Jewish interlocutor is worth considering again.