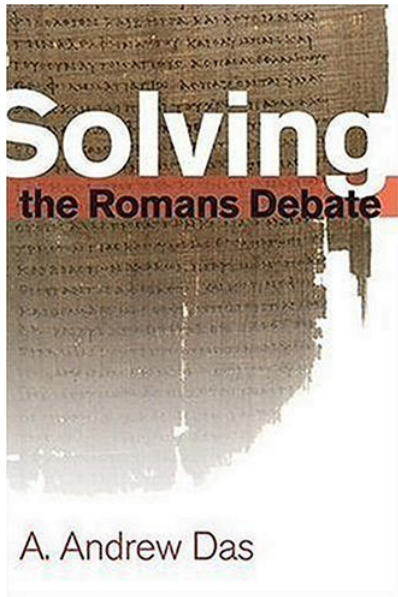


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Das, A. Andrew

Solving the Romans Debate

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A. Andrew Das's most recent work on the apostle Paul challenges the scholarly (and popular) consensus that Romans was addressed to a mixed congregation of Jews and Gentiles in the Romans church(es). Rather, Das contends, the letter was intended for a congregation comprised exclusively of Gentiles. The book comprises five chapters: (1) "The Romans Debate: Narrowing the Options"; (2) "The Ethnic Identity of the Romans Congregations: The Internal Evidence"; (3) "Former God-Fearers or Synagogue Subgroup?"; (4) "Claudius's Edict of Expulsion: The External Evidence"; and (5) Reading Romans with the Encoded Audience: Romans 7:7–25 and Romans 11:25–26."

Das ties into previous attempts to argue for an exclusively Gentile readership by scholars such as Paul Achtemeier, Lloyd Gaston, Stanley Stowers, and Neil Elliott. He champions, but seeks to correct weaknesses in, the work of Stowers and Elliott in particular. The gist of the argument is that Romans is addressed to an "encoded Gentile audience" (as derived from Stowers). I deduce that he means something along these lines: in Romans, Paul addresses Jewish issues and even addresses Jews directly (as per Rom 2:17–24), but in so doing he actually has in view God-fearing Gentiles and non-law observant Gentiles. The former, because of their earlier attachment to the synagogue, would be scrupulous, at least to some degree, for the Mosaic commandments, whereas the latter would have little,

if any, interest in them at all. In a personal communication, Professor Das has confirmed this impression:

The address of the Jew in Rom 2:17 would be rhetorical and would not identify the ethnic identity of audience members, although certainly relevant in topic for God-fearing gentiles. How scrupulous these gentiles would be for the Law, I suppose, would depend on the individual, although Romans 14–15, in my mind, indicates a significant group with proclivities for Law-observance appropriate for gentiles.

As regards the purpose of Romans, Das grants that Paul would have been hoping to reconcile Gentiles on both ends of the spectrum in their respective attitudes toward Judaism, in order, with their support, to facilitate his mission to Spain. Nevertheless, he downplays the Spanish mission as the central motivation of the letter. He believes, rather, that Paul wanted to guarantee that these Gentiles appreciated the Jewish roots of their faith and their indebtedness to Israel. Such a renewed appreciation of Israel would ease the apparent tensions in their mutual relations as regards Moses' law.

Since this is not intended as an extensive review article, I must cut to the chase and relate my impressions of the book. First of all, this is an extremely learned monograph, rich in detail and documentation and chockablock with insights. The historical treatment of Claudius's expulsion of the Jews from Rome is especially well done. For example, Das very effectively demonstrates that the assumption of a complete expulsion of the Jews under Claudius is fraught with insurmountable problems, especially as the estimated Jewish population of Rome in the first century was somewhere between twenty thousand and fifty thousand, far too many for a total ejection. As Das further explains, the Romans were always "expelling" people, and in many cases it was an exercise in political posturing and was more symbolic than actual. Additionally, while I understand Rom 7:14–25 in the more traditional terms of Paul's experience as a believer, the exegetical material (with extensive documentation) presented by Das is richly rewarding and has to be pondered seriously by any commentator on the passage. This level of scholarship is sustained throughout the entire book.

By way of a more critical interaction, I would just reiterate some familiar objections to a Gentile-only readership of Romans, with a wrinkle or two of my own. All of these are addressed by Das to one degree or the other, in most instances in great detail. At the end of the day, it is a question of plausibility, and readers will have to consult his book to adjudicate for themselves the legitimacy (or illegitimacy) of this brief analysis.

First, how can a document that is saturated with references to Israel and the nations not be addressed to a mixed congregation? To be sure, former God-fearers would take an active interest in the nation of Israel, especially in terms of its spiritual heritage and ethical values. But does it stand to reason that Paul would go to such lengths if there were no Jewish constituency of the Romans church(es) at all?

Second, the adjective “all” occurs more than seventy times in Romans, and in each instance it addresses the Jew/Gentile question. It is noteworthy that in his introduction to the letter Paul lifts titles and predicates of Israel from the Old Testament and applies them to “*all* God’s beloved in Rome” (1:7). For me this is all the more impactful if Jew and non-Jew alike are now the new “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), simply because a leveling process has taken place: all without distinction are able to render to God the obedience of faith (1:5). The question arises whether the *ethnē* of 1:5 are best taken as “Gentiles” rather than “nations.” If it is the former, then Das has a stronger case. Yet commentators are divided, and certainly a reasonable argument can be made for the latter. I prefer “nations” because Paul, according to the account of his missionary endeavors in Acts, commenced his preaching in the various local synagogues. The picture of Acts thus comports with the declaration of Rom 1:16 that the gospel is for *the Jew first* and also for the Greek.

Third, there is the “theme” of Romans as articulated by 1:16–17 (actually, a recapitulation of 1:1–7). According to Paul’s own statement, salvation is for everyone who has faith, quite irrespective of national origins. Certainly it is arguable that Paul could phrase the matter as he does because Roman Gentile Christians would want their Jewish neighbors to embrace the gospel. But again, it is matter of probability. As I read Paul, the thematic statement of Romans gains in power if there were in fact Jewish Christians in the city of Rome. Romans 1:16–17 is both a statement of the historical privilege of Israel (“the Jew first”) and the equality of Jew and Gentile in Christ (“also to the Greek”). These data comport nicely with the “no distinction” motif of the letter (3:22; 10:12).

Fourth, there is the matter of Paul’s Jewish interlocutor in Romans, not only in 2:17–24 but, I would propose, also in 6:1–7:12, where Paul addresses issues arising from his preaching. From the time of Bultmann at least, it has been more or less assumed that Paul’s line of argumentation mirrors the Hellenistic diatribe, especially the Stoic/Cynic variety. However, I think it more plausible to understand Paul’s literary technique in terms of the synagogue debate style, as first proposed by Joachim Jeremias and thereafter seconded by Herman Ridderbos. Paul’s interlocutor is, to be sure, fictive. Yet this imaginary person represents real-life attitudes that Paul encountered everywhere he went. If this is the actual backdrop, I would submit that it makes better sense that Paul would pursue such a pattern of argumentation because of Jewish believers in Rome who might

be posing the same questions as their non-Christian counterparts in the synagogues of the Diaspora.

Fifth, at the suggestion of scholars such as Richard Hays, J. C. Beker, and Das himself, on its bedrock level Romans is a theodicy. That is to say, in the letter Paul is justifying the ways of God to Israel: the Lord has remained faithful to his ancient people, only in the gospel of Christ, who is the law's *telos* (10:4). The first concrete expression of this motif is 3:1–8, as echoed by 3:26: God remains righteous “even while justifying [καὶ δικαιοῦντα] the one who has faith in Jesus.” From this vantage point, it is just chapters 9–11 that constitute the heart of the letter, because in them this theodicy theme is pursued vigorously and at length. Rather than being an appendix or a parenthesis of some sort, Rom 9–11 constitutes the high point of the epistle. I should think that such an elaborate argument for God's continued faithfulness to Israel (in the gospel) would be more understandable and compelling if the Roman congregations were populated by at least some Jews.

Sixth, there is the question of the “weak” and the “strong” in Rome. The issue is complicated by the fact that a number of options are open to interpreters. My preference is to view both groups in terms of their respective attitudes. Das writes of Paul's “obliqueness” about the weak and strong (262–63). He is right, but this can be accounted for in other terms than those suggested by him. In other words, Jews and Gentiles equally could be “weak” or “strong” depending on their attitude and stance toward the law. Law-observant Gentiles could be as weak as observant Jews, and nonobservant Jews could be as strong as Gentiles who had no interest in the minutiae of the Torah. Das further maintains that the weak and the strong were not separate groups but factions within the same gatherings, otherwise there would have been no particular problem. My response is that the separate groups did not necessarily have to meet under the same roof in order to know the theology and practice of the others, as it were, their “orthodoxy” and “orthopraxis.” Paul Minear was right to highlight the sociological factor of the household churches of nascent Christianity, meaning that the likely problem in Rome was that the various enclaves of “weak” and “strong” were meeting in separate dwellings and were refusing to receive the others into their homes. This would easily account for Paul's plea, “Receive one another as Christ has received you” (15:7).

Seventh, one should consider the catena of Old Testament passages in Rom 15:9–12, all celebrating God's reception of the nations into his family. At the risk of belaboring the point, these texts would have had their optimum impact on a Jewish segment of the church that was entertaining doubts about the calling of the Gentiles.

Finally, there is Paul's extensive use of the Old Testament throughout the Roman letter. To be sure, God-fearing Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogues would have had sufficient background to follow his arguments from the Scriptures (as in the Galatians churches also), but again it boils down to a matter of likelihood and probability. It seems to me that readers nurtured on the Scriptures from their childhood would have been particularly impacted.

In his conclusions (261 n. 1), Das cites A. J. M. Wedderburn's three criteria for a viable reconstruction of the concrete situation behind Romans: (1) Is the situation presupposed inherently plausible? Does it provide a coherent picture of the life of the Christian community in that place? (2) Is this picture compatible with what we know from other sources concerning the history of the earliest church? Is it similar to anything else we know happened elsewhere in the church of that day? (3) Does it fit in with what Paul's text says? Does it make good sense of that text? According to Das, "Each of these criteria may be affirmatively answered on the assumption of a gentile audience." I would grant that, given the *assumption* of a Gentile audience, Romans can be fitted into these criteria. Nevertheless, the assumption of a mixed congregation fits the bill equally well. The bottom line, again, is that of plausibility. Does the New Testament characteristically represent the earliest Christian communities as composed of only one ethnic variety, even in the case of Galatians and Hebrews? Judging from Acts, Paul won converts from both Israel and non-Jewish peoples, either synagogue adherents or not. I should think that a typical example is provided by Acts 18:1–11: the founding of the Corinthian church. In fairness, though, I relate Das's (email) response:

On the concluding point via Acts, I agree that Paul began in synagogues in his ministry, but Paul has not yet been to Rome and I do believe that Christianity began in the Roman synagogues before being forced by circumstances to meet independently. Roman Christianity therefore has its own story.

In sum, at this point in time, I still need to be persuaded of Das's central thesis (although I am prepared to be convinced). Nevertheless, this is a book of outstanding value and needs to be pondered carefully by Pauline scholars generally and interpreters of Romans in particular. Congratulations are in order.