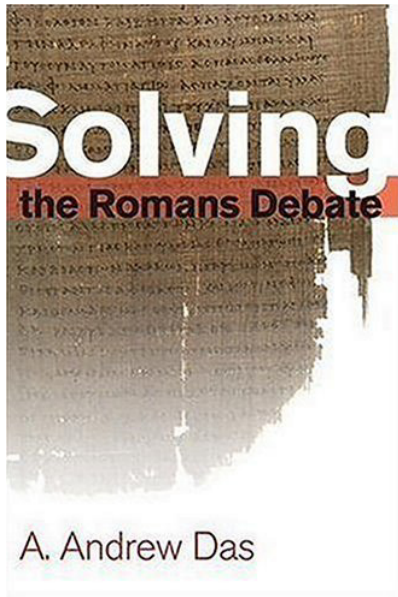


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**Das, A. Andrew**

***Solving the Romans Debate***

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Andrew Das has already written two fine books on the apostle Paul: *Paul, the Law, and the Covenant* (Hendrickson, 2001); and *Paul and the Jews* (Hendrickson, 2003). To that pair of important contributions to the field of Pauline studies, Das now adds this provocative monograph, aimed at *Solving the Romans Debate*. With the term “the Romans debate,” Das has in mind the lively conversation concerning the historical circumstances of Paul’s letter to the churches in Rome, specifically the ethnic constituency of the Roman congregations that received the missive. Standing against the prevailing view that Romans was written to a mixed audience consisting of both Jews and Gentiles, Das instead counters that Paul wrote to “Roman congregations composed exclusively of gentiles” (1; elsewhere: “entirely gentile audience” [2]; “all-gentile audience” [264]).

Das, who holds the Niebuhr Distinguished Chair in the Department of Theology and Religion at Elmhurst College, is not the first to claim that Romans was written to an all-Gentile audience. He follows in the footsteps of Paul Achtemeier, Neil Elliott, and Stanley Stowers. Yet this meticulously researched book provides the most sustained and carefully argued statement of this position—one that will need to be reckoned with by all future commentators on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans.

Chapter 1 (“The Romans Debate: Narrowing the Options”) sets the stage by considering the integrity of the letter, the origin of the Roman church, and the occasion and purpose of Romans. Das remains unconvinced by the various partition theories that question the literary integrity of the epistle, and he concludes that “any reconstruction of the situation within the Roman churches must employ the full sixteen chapters” (23). While recognizing that there may have been a variety of reasons that Paul wrote Romans—including reflection on his impending journeys to Jerusalem and Spain—Das focuses on Paul’s attempt to address a concrete situation in the Roman churches.

Chapter 2 (“The Ethnic Identity of the Roman Congregations: The Internal Evidence”) establishes Das’s thesis through a careful evaluation of all of the evidence from the letter that bears on the issue of the ethnic identity of its recipients. Positively, Das contends that the construction *en pasin tois ethnesin hyper tou onomatos autou en hois este kai hymeis klētoi Iēsou Christou* in Rom 1:5–6 should be interpreted as an indication that the Romans themselves were Gentiles; that Rom 1:8–15 (esp. v. 13: *kathōs kai en tois loipois ethnesin*) refers to Paul’s past and future success among *Gentile* believers; that the audience is directly addressed as “Gentiles” in 11:13; and that references to the past impurity of the readers in 6:19 and 13:11–14 reflect Jewish discourse about *Gentiles*.

After a section in which he establishes the validity of the category of “God-fearer” in the first century, Das then appraises all the potential counterevidence that might suggest a Jewish audience (or Jews among the audience) in Rome. First, the fact that Paul presumes knowledge of the Jewish Scriptures among his readers does not reveal anything about their ethnic identity, for the recipients could have been God-fearers familiar with Torah through a prior association with Jewish synagogues. Second, the direct address to “the Jew” in Rom 2:17–29 reflects a diatribe between Paul and an imaginary interlocutor, a rhetorical device that does not require this opponent to have been a member of the Roman churches. Third, those identified as Paul’s *syngeneis* in Rom 16:7, 11 are not Jews. Rather, Paul is using the metaphorical language of fictive kinship—found elsewhere in the Pauline corpus and in the extant documents of some *collegia*—to indicate his affection for these individuals. Moreover, while Prisca and Aquila (16:3) were Jews, and while Andronicus and Junia (16:7) may have been Jewish, these individuals are associated with Paul’s missionary work among the Gentiles and were not members of the Roman churches *per se*: “The presence of a handful of Jewish Christian missionaries to the gentiles would only affirm the gentile identity of the Roman congregations” (101). Yet Das considers the greetings in Rom 16 largely irrelevant in any case, for these greetings are written in the second-person, which may indicate that “the individuals mentioned in Rom 16 were not themselves members of the Roman congregations at the time Paul wrote” (262). Finally, Das presents a detailed reading of Rom 14:1–15:6 that suggests that Paul’s instructions are directed to a concrete situation involving non-law-observant

Gentiles (i.e., “the strong”) and law-observant Gentiles (i.e., “the weak”), the practices of the latter group having been shaped by their experience as participants in synagogues. That is to say, it is the observance of Jewish customs that is at stake in Rom 14:1–15:6, but the division does not run along ethnic lines (i.e., Gentile believers = strong; Jewish believers = weak). Instead, Gentile God-fearers observing Jewish customs were experiencing conflict with their Gentile brothers and sisters who, along with Paul, felt that “nothing is unclean in itself” (Rom 14:14).

Chapter 3 (“Former God-Fearers or Synagogue Subgroup?”) critically interacts with Mark Nanos’s thesis that Romans reflects a situation in which the readers of Paul’s letter were still meeting as members of Jewish synagogue assemblies in Rome—with “the weak” in Rom 14:1–15:6 being non-Christian Jews. Instead, Das contends, “A decisive split had taken place between the Jews and the Christ-believers by the time Paul wrote” (148). While this section offers some interesting tidbits, it largely rehashes earlier critiques of Nanos’s hypothesis offered by Robert Gagnon (“Why the ‘Weak’ at Rome Cannot Be Non-Christian Jews,” *CBQ* 62 [2000]: 64–82) and Das himself (*Paul and the Jews*, 69–74).

Chapter 4 (“Claudius’s Edict of Expulsion: The External Evidence”) turns to the external data in support of Das’s thesis. Sifting through the extant evidence surrounding Claudius’s expulsion of the Jews from Rome, Das posits that around 49 C.E. the emperor expelled certain Jews from Rome in response to quarrels within the synagogues over the identity of Christ. Das helpfully demonstrates that this expulsion cannot have affected all Jews in Rome, for their numbers (estimated at between 20,000 and 50,000) were simply too large to have left no trace of such a large-scale deportation in the historical record. Moreover, Das shows that many Roman “expulsions” were disorganized and largely symbolic events. Yet among those discharged from Rome were Jewish-Christians such as Prisca and Aquila (see Acts 18:2) along with some of the prominent Christ-believing God-fearers, and it would have been the Jewish synagogue leaders who identified these individuals to the Roman authorities. After this episode, “[the] Christ-believing God-fearers remaining in Rome were forced to recognize that they were no longer welcome in the Jewish community and would have begun meeting separately for worship” (201), thus commencing an important shift in Roman Christianity.

Chapter 5 (“Reading Romans with the Encoded Audience: Romans 7:7–25 and Romans 11:25–26”) offers readings of two specific passages with Das’s Gentile audience in mind. The first provides an engaging exegetical analysis of Rom 7:7–25 in which Das claims “the ‘I’ is a gentile God-fearer” (232). Those convinced of Das’s overall thesis will find this to be a particularly rewarding segment of the book. The second reading, which concentrates on Rom 11:25–26, does not shed much new light on this difficult text, for it is clear enough from Rom 11:13 that Paul is primarily addressing Gentile readers in this section.

The volume ends with a brief conclusion, followed by a twenty-nine-page bibliography and indices of authors, subjects, and primary sources.

Das concludes with reference to three criteria identified by A. J. M. Wedderburn for assessing the viability of any historical reconstruction of the concrete situation behind Paul's letter to the 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? (261 n. 1).

With respect to the first two criteria, Das has certainly offered a plausible account. His historical reconstruction—particularly as it incorporates external evidence—could well account for the life of the Roman church and also correspond to what we know happened elsewhere in the mission of the early church, where Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, established churches consisting largely (or even exclusively) of Gentiles (e.g., in Galatia, Thessalonica, or Philippi). But does Das's argument for an all-Gentile audience fit in with what the text of Romans actually says? At this point, many questions remain. Das's claim of an entirely Gentile audience seems to founder on the evidence of Rom 16:1–27, which, to his credit, he counts as an authentic part of the letter. Are we to suppose that Paul's use of the term *syngenēs* in Rom 16:7, 11 is purely metaphorical, in spite of the fact that only three of the twenty-nine individuals in Rom 16:1–16 receive this unusual designation, which is not found in any other Pauline epistles? Moreover, if Jews such as Prisca, Aquila, Andronicus, and Junia who are greeted in the second-person in Rom 16 “were not themselves members of the Roman congregations at the time Paul wrote” (262), then what is their relationship to the “encoded” audience of Romans? Surely they were in Rome when Paul penned the letter, and they must have had some relationship with those who received the epistle and the apostle who penned it. Are they really not part of the audience of Romans? Indeed, has Das's detailed study of the audience of Romans paid sufficient attention to the actual address of the letter: “To *all* God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (1:7)? If the second-person discourse indicates that none of these individuals were members of the Roman churches, what then do we make of the second-person directive *aspasasthe allēlous en philēmati hagiō* at the conclusion of Paul's greetings in 16:16? Finally, with respect to Das's claim that the conflict behind Rom 14:1–15:6 involves non-law-observant Gentiles and law-observant Gentiles, how are we to reconcile a Paul who accepts Torah observance among Gentiles in Rome with the Paul who was incensed by similar practices among Gentiles in Galatia (see Gal 4:8–10)?

Perhaps these differences can be accounted for by a softening of Paul's perspective or by the fact that Paul did not establish the Roman churches, but this issue merits further investigation.

Andrew Das's *Solving the Romans Debate* challenges the consensus view that Romans was written to an audience consisting *largely* of Gentiles with the counterclaim that Romans was written to an audience consisting *entirely* of Gentiles. Will this noteworthy monograph succeed in shifting the prevailing paradigm? Perhaps not entirely, but only time will tell. Future participants in "the Romans debate," however, will have Das to thank for this stimulating contribution to the conversation.