THE PROBLEM OF JEWS AND GENTILES IN THE
MACRO-STRUCTURE OF ROMANS *

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BY WAY OF A PREFACE

This can be considered another 'chapter' in my attempt to understand Romans. Some of the earlier work is left behind, but new steps are taken to understand the meaning of chapters 1 and 2 also, and of the paraenetic section, chapter 12-15, and so to bring the investigation of the macro-structure or semantic deep structure of the letter to a preliminary conclusion.

There is a certain disinterest, a certain boredom, which takes hold of one when engaging in this kind of work. The reason is that the work has no meaning in itself, and is of no enduring value. The degree to which it is successful resembles the scaffolding of a building; it becomes superfluous and needs to be abandoned when the building comes to completion. As the macro-structure of Romans emerges the means by which it is uncovered becomes superfluous. I hope that what is presented here will be taken in a similar way, that we will not have to quibble about details, but will concentrate on trying to determine whether and to what degree, that what emerges is indeed the semantic deep structure of Romans.

INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

It has become increasingly clear that the problem of the interpretation of Romans remains unsolved. The letter is interpreted partly as an exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith, which leaves the largest part of it unexplained, partly piecemeal, as if the various remaining parts have their own meanings. In order to solve the problem of the interpretation of the letter it will be necessary to discover how its individual parts together contribute to give expression to a coherent meaning, similar to the way in which words together give expression to meaning in a sentence.

When one interprets Romans as the exposition of justification by faith, the letter reaches a climax in 3:21-24, making the rest of it an extended anti-climax. That, in itself, should be an indication that this approach is incorrect, but there do not appear to be viable alternatives available at present. There is no way around this but to admit that we do not know what the meaning is which comes

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to expression in this letter. To put it in another way, we have not succeeded in recognizing its semantic deep structure or macrostructure as that underlying meaning which determined Paul's choice of words, of syntactic structures, and of arguments, as the means of its expression. If it has become clear that the macro-structure is no longer evident, means must be found to allow it to come to the surface once more.

1. THE RHETORICAL QUESTIONS IN CHAPTERS 3-11

A clue to the macro-structure of a major part of the letter, chapters 3-11, may be found in the rhetorical questions in that part of the letter. These questions occur at points when Paul, so to speak, changes gears in the progression of his argument. At these transition points between the various stages of his argument he pauses for a moment to ask what point he has reached in his reasoning. These may also, at times, have been breathers, to see if he had made any progress. In his reasoning, Paul knew where he wanted to come out, but he did not know how to get there.

From all appearances Paul developed the main arguments in his letters very much ad hoc. Thus one can interpret him forwards only, because that is the only way his arguments move. They do not have logical coherence that reaches backwards. That is why his letters are so full of logical inconsistencies and even contradictions, as has been known for a very long time. That does not mean that he had not been operating from a macro-structure which determined the choice of his arguments. On the contrary, it was precisely because he operated completely from a semantic macro-structure that he was unconcerned about the logical cohesion of his arguments.

The following is a list of the rhetorical questions in Romans 1-11.

3:1 What then is the extra of the Jew, or what the value of circumcision?
3:3b Will their untrustworthiness not destroy the trustworthiness of God?
3:5c Is God not unjust who transmits wrath?
3:9 What advantage do we then have?
3:27a Where then is the boasting (cf. 27c)?
3:31 Thus the law is destroyed through faith?
4:1 What then shall we say did our forefather Abraham in
accordance with the flesh receive?

4:9 This blessing, then, is it on the circumcised or also on the uncircumcised? (cf. v.10).

6:1 What then shall we say? Let us keep sin in order that mercy may become abundant (cf. v.2b).

6:15 What then? Should we sin because we are not under the law, but under mercy? (cf. v.16).

7:7 What then shall we say? The law is sin?

7:13 The good then became death for me?

8:31 What then shall we say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (cf. vv.32-35).

9:14 What then shall we say? Is there not injustice with God?

9:19 Now you will say to me: why does he still find fault?

9:30 What then shall we say? That the gentiles who did not pursue righteousness received righteousness, the righteousness from faith, whereas Israel who followed the law of righteousness did not attain the law? Why?

11:1 I say then; Did God not reject his people?

11:7 What then? That which Israel sought, that it did not find, but the elect found it, and the rest were hardened.

11:11 Thus I say: Did they not stumble in order to fall?

11:19 You will say: Branches were cut in order that I should be grafted in.

The first thing to be noted about this list is its remarkable material unity. The questions all concern the problem of the Jews and the law. Note also that the issues raised in the first two questions in 3:1 and 3 are taken up again in the last four in 11:1,7,11,19. The question concerning the untrustworthiness of some in Israel, raised in 3:3, is taken up again in 11:1, and answered conclusively by what Paul remembers about Elijah in 11:2-5. The question concerning the extra of the Jew and the value of circumcision which he raised in 3:1, and confirmed and answered in only a very preliminary way in verse 2, before he was side-tracked by the question of verse 3, is answered conclusively by the reference to the wild branches that were grafted in on the cultured olive tree, in 11:17-32, after
the side-tracking question of 3:3 was answered by the reference to Elijah in 11:2-5. The answer is given in a nutshell in the provocative exclamation of 11:18. 'It is not you who bear the roots, but the roots you!' Once all this has been achieved Paul has no difficulty in concluding the entire argument with the doxology of 11:33-36.

Paul, notwithstanding everything, was a Jew who had become a Christian, and he was on his way to Rome from which, a number of years earlier, Claudius had expelled all Jews. Thus he writes in Romans 1:16, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation for all who believe, Jews first and Hellenes!' 'Jews first'!! That is what carries the argument in the rest of this letter. Paul, going to Rome from where Jews had been expelled because of controversies with the Christians, himself a Jew, says almost from the beginning, 'Jews first', and Jews remain 'first' throughout the letter, all the way down to chapter 11 in the provocative challenge of verse 18, 'It is not you who bear the roots, but the roots you!' The Jews 'first'!!

But what then about justification by faith? What indeed?? That was Paul's question too! If there was justification by faith alone, why then the Jews? That is the question Paul tries to answer in this letter, addressed as it is to the congregation whom he expects will want to know exactly that from him: He, a Jew, coming to Rome!

A possible answer might have been that they did not count at all; but Paul did not believe that for a moment. In his earlier letters he frequently expressed pride in being a Jew, but rather facetiously. Now he is confronted with it in a very challenging way. But he is also not about to abandon his conviction that justification is by faith alone.

In his letter to the Romans Paul wants to argue - and argues very convincingly - that justification by faith and God's election of the Jews are not contradictory, but are both integral to God's plan of salvation, and that gentle Christians too, who live by faith alone, are justified by having been incorporated into that scheme. Thus, justification by faith is not the point of the letter, but the fundamental presupposition on which it is based. The question which arises from the acceptance of that proposition is, 'what then of the Jews?' It is a question that is repeated again and again in a variety of ways, directed as much to himself by Paul as it is directed as a rhetorical device to his readers, until it is answered to his satisfaction in 11:11-32. When this is recognized the argument not only makes sense all the way to the end, but it also becomes clear that, and why Paul remains so engaged in the argument until that point is reached.
Thus we encounter Paul taking a remarkably paradoxical, maybe even contradictory position in Romans compared with Galatians. In the earlier letter he proclaims the irreconcilability of circumcision, representing an existence under the law, with faith in Christ. In Romans he now argues that God's election of Israel, represented by circumcision and the law, is not only not inconsistent with, but essential for an understanding of justification by faith. Addressing himself to two very different situations - the Galatians considering becoming circumcised, and Rome as the city from which the Jews had been expelled some years earlier because of Jewish/Christian friction, but which Paul now plans to visit - Paul reacted in fundamentally different ways, without necessarily being inconsistent. Almost certainly he would not have encouraged the Roman Christians to be circumcised, but, on the other hand, one would hardly expect him to have argued in his letter to the Galatians the way he does in Romans.

2. THE PLACEMENT OF 2:1

This proposed macro-structure or semantic deep structure may serve to explain the surface structure (i.e., discourse structure, of chapters 3-11). However, it leaves the structure of the letter as a whole still unexplained (i.e. including most of chapters 1 and 2, and, less crucially, chapters 12-15). The proposed macro-structure may not even be the meaning which chapters 1-11 have in the letter (i.e. in the same way as the meaning of an individual word, taken by itself, may not be the same as that which it expresses as part of a sentence). With that we are, to begin with, thrown back on chapters 1 and 2 in the same way because we need to try to clarify the possible meanings of the individual words in a sentence before the meaning of the sentence as a whole can come through.

The first question in connection with chapters 1 and 2 is how these two chapters relate to each other. The most crucial structural problem is the meaning of 2:1. It does not fit smoothly in the surface structure of the text as it now stands. Typically, the way this problem is solved is by, in effect, assuming that the structural relationships are already known. The meaning of the verse is then made to fit such an assumption, by rearranging the surface structure of the text most radically. The very fact, however, that the verse does not fit smoothly in the surface structure of the text may provide a useful clue to the macro-structure of this part of the letter. A statement that does not fit smoothly in the surface structure of a text, like a parenthesis, may be an important clue to its semantic deep structure or macro-structure. Thus, Romans 2:1 may be an important clue to the semantic deep structure of chapters 1 and 2, and in that way also may contribute to answering the question concerning the macro-structure of the letter as a whole. However, it
must then be permitted to remain where it now stands in the text, unless there are deep-structural considerations (not surface-structural considerations) which indicate that it is misplaced.

It should be noted first that the statement is addressed generally to 'everyone who judges' pas ho krīnōn. Thus one should not take it as addressed specifically to the pharisaic type of person who judges others. Such an interpretation would strongly limit the applicability of the admonition, providing an easy escape for every hypocrite!! The Jew, the Pharisee, is specifically addressed only in 2:17ff in case he/she thinks he/she is excluded.

A meaning which suggests itself much more naturally for 2:1 is that it is addressed to Paul's gentile readers. What may be coming through here is that his earlier opinion of gentile Christians as expressed in Galatians 2:15 still holds. There he distinguished 'we Jews' as not ex ethnōn hamartōlot. Gentile Christians are removed from their sinful past only by the skin of their teeth, and they would do well to remember that. He reminds them of this in 11:19-21, 'Thus you say, the branches were cut out in order that I may be grafted in. Fine. Through disbelief they were cut out, and through faith you stand (in their place). Have no illusions, but beware! For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you.'

If this sounds harsh, Paul may have been aware of it. In 15:15-19 he writes, 'It was with daring that I wrote to you' (v.15) and, 'For I would not dare to say anything which Christ does not make me say for the sake of the obedience of the gentiles, in word and deed, in the power of signs and miracles, in the power of the spirit' (vv.18f).

Note also the more general co-ordination of 2:4-11 and 11:18-24. In 2:4 he writes, 'Or do you frown on the abundance of his graciousness and his broadminded leniency, unaware that with his graciousness God leads you to a change of mind', and in 11:18, 'Do not boast about the branches. If you think you can boast, (do not forget that) it is not you who bear the root, but the root you.' This in turn may shed light on his warning back in 2:5, 'In accordance with your stubbornness and unrepentant attitude you gather wrath for yourself as a treasure for the day of wrath when God will sit in righteous judgment.' And so again also the warning in 11:20, 'Have no illusions, but beware, for it is through faith that you stand.'

If one takes 1:18-2:29 and 11:13-24 as brackets which set the limits within which the argument of the first eleven chapters of Romans takes place, it becomes clear that what Paul is driving at in this part of the letter is that the Christian (specifically the gentile
Christian) can neither boast about the sinfulness of the gentiles, because it is faith alone which separates her/him from that sinfulness, nor can she/he boast about the disobedience of the Jew, because, once more, it is only faith which brings about the reversal of their circumstances. Thus, in 2:1 Paul apparently gets ahead of his argument, and therefore has to take a step back again with 2:2.

It should be noted, however, that Paul is arguing that it is the same for all, Jew and gentile. There is no distinction because all fall short of what is required to participate in the glory of God (3:22b-23). The point is that the principle of the law is not only the context within which the believer is rescued by the principle of faith; it remains the context, and his readers tend to forget this. However, more than specifically gentile Christians enter the picture. In 2:17ff he makes what one should consider a side swipe at his Jewish readers, in case they, not being subject to the deprivation of the gentiles, think they are exempt from the argument. At the same time that 'side swipe' makes all the more urgent the question concerning that 'something more' which characterizes the situation of the Jew (3:1), something which Paul not only reaffirms explicitly in 3:2, but which becomes the culminating point of the entire discourse when he challenges his gentile readers that, 'it is not you who bear the root, but the root you' (11:18).

That may be what Paul already has in mind with the reference to Abraham in chapter 4. The theme for the discussion of the faith of Abraham in chapter 4 is set by 3:29-31. There Paul argues that it is the same God, '... who justifies the circumcised out of faith, and the uncircumcised through faith' (3:30). This is in response to a question which presupposes the priority of the Jew, 'Is God of the Jews only, and not also of the gentiles?' (v.30). But the next question appears to turn this priority around, 'Has faith then not completely displaced the law, and thus the privilege of the Jew?' (v.30). Paul categorically denies this, asserting that faith affirms the law. In the discussion of Abraham's faith in chapter 4 he then shows that it is not only the Christian who can claim Abraham as forefather. He is also the forefather of the circumcised, 'for those who are not only circumcised (i.e., under the law), but also follow in the footsteps of the believing, while still uncircumcised, Abraham' (4:12). What Paul means is that 'we Jews' were also saved through the medium of faith. In this way he intends to unveil the true meaning of circumcision and the law.

Thus, Paul's argument in 3:29-4:25 with reference to Abraham is that Israel too lived by faith, and not works. The circumcised were justified ek pisteōs, from faith (3:30) (i.e., by participation in the faith of the as-yet-uncircumcised Abraham (cf. 4:12)) in a way similar to the justification of the uncircumcised dià pisteōs,
through faith (3:30), by believing in him who raised Jesus from the dead (4:24). The faith of the circumcised is an active participation, 'heilsgeschichtlich', in the faith of Abraham, whereas the faith of the uncircumcised, who does not participate in this 'heilsgeschichtliche' privilege, is existentially parallel to that of Abraham. The Christian's faith in 'the God who raised Jesus, our Lord from the dead' (4:24) is parallel to that of Abraham who believed in the same God, but who in his case made alive his own dead body, and that of his wife, Sarah (4:18f).

What is so remarkable about this letter, however, is that Paul evidently cannot rest until he succeeds, to his own satisfaction, in incorporating the existential faith of the Christian believer into the 'heilsgeschichtliche' faith of Israel. The Christian does not stand existentially on her/his own, but draws 'heilsgeschichtlich' from the 'sap' which nourishes the faith of Israel (11:17). There is hardly a point in this letter which confirms the argument of Galatians. To borrow an expression from Friedrich Gogarten, Paul obviously did not read his own writings.

3. ROMANS 15:7-13 AS THE EXPLICITLY PARAENETIC CULMINATION OF PAUL'S ARGUMENT

If the above reasoning about the semantic deep structure of Romans is correct, it should be obvious that the letter is not a theoretical exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith, but a paraenetic argument based on that doctrine. What Paul argues is that faith removes every base on which one can judge another, and, very specifically, that the gentile believer has no grounds on which to boast against the Jew, because Israel, too, was justified through the medium of faith. And if Israel seems to have forfeited this privilege, Paul finds assurance in the incident with Elijah that God has not rejected his people. With that assurance he can then argue that the gentile believer draws from the same sap that nourished the faith of Israel. Thus, in order to make his intended point in this letter, Paul first has to find a way of affirming the continued reality of the faith of Israel. This understanding of the macrostructure of the letter is confirmed in a remarkable way by the culmination of the paraenetic section in 15:7-13, which is also the culmination of the argument of the letter as a whole.

The fundamental question in connection with 15:7-13 is the relationship of verse 9a, 'the gentiles praise God for (his) mercy', to verse 8. Is it to be taken as a parallel only to the last part of that verse, 'to reinforce the promises to the fathers', both as final clauses after, 'Christ became a servant of circumcision for the sake of the truth of God', or is it a parallel to the entire verse 8, both being dependent on the légo dé, 'thus I say', with which verse 8 begins? In
the former case the activity of Christ will be understood to have parallel effects in the reinforcement of the promises to the fathers, and in the gentiles praising God for his mercy; in the latter, Christ's activity which has the effect of reinforcing the promises to the fathers will itself have as a parallel the praising of God by the gentiles.

What makes the latter alternative unacceptable materially, even when it is considered stylistically preferable (e.g. Michel), is that it appears to set Christ and the gentiles over and against each other. But that is true only grammatically. Semantically it is not the gentiles who stand over and against Christ, but their praising God for his mercy which stands over and against Christ, reinforcing the promises to the fathers when the truthfulness of God is threatened by the disobedience of some in Israel (cf. 3:3f), which is the precise point to which Paul has brought his argument in 11:1-32. The effect is to place the activity of Christ within the framework of the salvation of the Jews as the reinforcement of the promises to the fathers against the threat of the disobedience of some of Israel, and to make the salvation of the gentiles subservient to that as an act of God's mercy. At the same time it affirms the unity of Jewish and gentile Christianity on that basis, as the quotations from scripture which follow in verses 9-12, reveal.

It is highly significant that this final admonition is introduced with, 'therefore accept each other as Christ received you, to the glory of God' (15:7). This introduction, followed by the distinct, but coordinate, reference to Jewish 'Heilsgeschichte' and gentile salvation, suggests that it is Jewish and gentile Christians who are exhorted to accept each other in this final admonition in the letter. Thus, it appears that the entire argument of Romans is to provide a basis on which Paul can make this final exhortation. All that remains to be asked concerning the semantic unity of the structure of Romans is to what degree the other admonitions in chapters 12-15 are also to be understood in the context of what Paul believes to be an unwillingness of Christians in Rome to accept each other because they feel so secure about the place which each has established for her/himself.

CONCLUSION AND PROSPECT

Thus, Paul's letter to the Romans appears to be as much as any of his other letters, directed to what he believes to be concrete pastoral issues of the church at Rome. The letter is as direct, and as hard-hitting a moral confrontation as is Galatians, even though the tone and the reasoning is more relaxed. The immediate occasion for the letter is obviously his intended visit to Rome on his way to Spain, but that is not what carries the argument. Paul knows only
one way of relating to his readers - as a pastor. Thus, the semantic deep structure of the letter (i.e. its macro-structure) is not his planned visit, but the addressing of the church at Rome on the issue of the judgment of others on the basis of the security of his own position. It is also clear that he addresses this issue within the framework of the question of the salvation of Israel. According to Paul, justification through faith leaves no basis on which to judge others, but the cutting edge of his argument is that Israel too is saved by faith (i.e. 'heilsgeschichtlich') by the faith of Abraham as its source, that the purpose of Christ is to secure the promises to the fathers (15:8). According to Paul in Romans, thus, there is no 'new covenant', only a reaffirmation of the old one through Christ, and the Christian who is justified by faith draws the life-sap of her or his existence by being integrated into that covenant as secured by Christ. Therefore the gentile Christian has no grounds whatsoever on which to pass judgment on the Jews.

The basic motivation for my studies on the structure of Galatians and of Romans has been the conviction that Paul's writings are not products of theological reflection, and thus cannot be interpreted theologically. There is no such thing as a theology of Paul, although many New Testament scholars have written 'theologies' based on Paul. The letters individually and as a group do not have theological integrity. They are written from fundamental religious/pastoral concerns. Instead of trying to uncover the semantic deep structure of the letters in an implicit theology, or trying to inter-relate Paul's various statements at the surface level, it is necessary to uncover their semantic deep structures in Paul's religious/pastoral concerns. That is the direction into which the 'religionsgeschichtliche' school has pointed us, as the 'Sache', the subject-matter, of Paul's writings. Unfortunately Rudolf Bultmann (in attempting to carry out further this concern of the 'religionsgeschichtliche' school, of which he was a product) had at his disposal only a philosophical logic, which required of him to translate Paul's religious language into philosophical (i.e. existentialist) language in his program of 'demythologization'. I believe that we can carry out the intentions of the 'religionsgeschichtliche' school, and more specifically of Bultmann, not by demythologizing Paul's language and thought, but by a mythical interpretation in which an attempt is made to uncover the logic of the myths themselves. In other words, we can carry out these intentions by uncovering the mythology of Paul and I mean a mythology, not merely the myth or myths of which Paul made use or which he developed. In that regard Claude Levi-Strauss' understanding that there is a logic underlying myth that is quite as vigorous as a philosophical logic, is of decisive importance. Thus, instead of interpreting Paul by translating his thoughts into theological modes of thinking, it is necessary to move in the opposite direction of trying to understand the logic which underlies the mythical language itself, a logic which controlled not
only Paul's thought, but that of the entire Hellenistic age. It was in the framework of that logic, and not of a theology as we understand it today, that Paul tried to cope with the fundamental polarities of human existence. These include the tension between the divine and the human, between heaven and earth, between determination and freedom, between justification as a gift of God through Christ, and justification as what is one's due for what was performed in the flesh, between justification by reliance on God's mercy and justification by works. The significance of Paul is that in his struggle to cope with these contradictory features of human existence, he never capitulates to the tension between them by surrendering to one side of the polarity at the cost of the other.