

THE JEWISH PAUL: CRITIQUING THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE TRADITIONAL
INTERPRETATION OF ROMANS 14:1-15:13

Erik Mattson
HIST 4499
Dr. Brian Swain
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It is common to hear Christians preach about how Saul of Tarsus converted from Judaism to Christianity and became the Apostle Paul. His belief in Jesus resulted in him abandoning his Torah-observant lifestyle. As with many popular myths, the seed from which they grow is found in scholarship. According to the *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*, “Paul the Christian had once been Paul the Jew.”¹ This is said as if once Paul became a follower of Jesus he was stripped of his Jewish identity. Frequently, Romans 14:14, 20 is used to substantiate this claim. Interpreters rely on this conclusion about Paul to inform how they then read the rest of the passage, specifically, when they attempt to identify the “weak” and the “strong” groups that Paul describes. Notably, Paul places himself in the category of the “strong” and does not explicitly identify either group as being made up of Jews or Gentiles.²

The traditional interpretation of this passage is that Paul was addressing two groups split by ethnic identity and Torah-observance. The weak were Jewish believers in Jesus (and some Gentiles) who continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath and food laws found in the Torah. The strong were Gentile believers (and some Jews like Paul) who did not observe Torah and they would “eat everything”³ and “[esteem] all days alike.”⁴ When Paul said that “nothing is unclean in itself”⁵ and “everything is indeed clean,”⁶ he was declaring that kosher law had been abolished. This was emphasis was heightened by his allegiance with the strong group. Paul’s goal in writing this chapter was to get the strong to stop “despising”⁷ the weak and the weak to stop “[passing] judgement”⁸ on the strong. This would ultimately be solved once the weak

¹ Marion L. Soards, *Mercer Dictionary of the Bible* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2001), s.v. “Paul.”

² Romans 15:1 (English Standard Version), unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations are from the ESV.

³ Romans 14:3

⁴ Romans 14:5

⁵ Romans 14:14

⁶ Romans 14:20

⁷ Romans 14:3

⁸ Ibid.

abandoned their practice of Torah customs after the strong emulated the behavior of the weak for a period of time.

This view can be found in the works of early church fathers such as Origen⁹ and Reformation leaders like John Calvin.¹⁰ Francis Watson is a modern adherent to this conclusion, “[Paul] wishes to convert the Jewish Christian congregation to Paulinism – to the theory of freedom from the law, if not to the practice.”¹¹ John Barclay says, “[Paul] himself regards key aspects of the law as wholly dispensable . . . his theology introduces into the Roman community a Trojan horse which threatens the integrity of those who sought to live according to the law.”¹² Mark Nanos, who does not agree with this conclusion, notes that this interpretation has “almost universal agreement.”¹³

As widespread as this interpretation is, it has not gone unchallenged. Ernst Käsemann¹⁴ and C.K. Barrett¹⁵ argue that Paul was not addressing issues of Jewish religious practices but of pagan practices that these new followers of Jesus have fallen into or have yet to give up. The justification for this conclusion is that neither kosher law or Sabbath observance are explicitly mentioned in Romans 14. The weak are described as abstainers from meat and wine which are not instructions found in Jewish law and could be found in pagan practices at the time.¹⁶ That

⁹ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6-10*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002) *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 17, 2018).

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to The Romans*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library).

¹¹ Francis Watson, “The Two Roman Congregations: Romans 14:1-15:13,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl Donfried (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 207.

¹² John Barclay, “Do We Undermine the Law?: A Study of Romans 14.1-15.6,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, ed. James D.G. Dunn (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 308.

¹³ Mark Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 87.

¹⁴ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 364-387.

¹⁵ C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1971), 234-250.

¹⁶ Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 367; Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 237.

said, I agree with Barclay that it is highly unlikely that Paul would be so lenient toward pagan practices.¹⁷

Other scholars have provided a more substantial challenge to the traditional view by agreeing that Jewish religious practices were being addressed but offer an interpretation that is compatible with the notion that Paul remained Torah-observant. This group includes Mark Nanos,¹⁸ David Rudolph,¹⁹ William Campbell,²⁰ Brian Tucker,²¹ and David Bolton.²² Though their identification of the weak and the strong and what qualified a person as a member of either of these groups differ, I agree that Paul was addressing two groups that were disputing over Jewish practices, rather than pagan practices.

In this article, the presuppositions of the traditional interpretation will be explored at length. These presuppositions are (1) that Paul abandoned Judaism and Torah-observance once he became a follower of Jesus (2) that there were some followers of Jesus who did not practice any Torah customs (the strong) and that the weak must include Jewish followers of Jesus.²³ Once these presuppositions are corrected, I will posit that the weak and the strong consisted exclusively of Gentiles who differed in their practice and understanding of Torah customs.

Regarding the presupposition that Paul abandoned Judaism, David Bolton says, “Such a reading [of Romans 14] rests on the presupposition that Paul rather successfully extricated

¹⁷ Barclay, “Do We Undermine the Law?,” 292-93.

¹⁸ Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans*, 85-165.

¹⁹ David Rudolph, “Paul and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Romans 14:14, 20,” in *Paul the Jew: Rereading the Apostle as a Figure of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini and Carlos A. Segovia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 151-182.

²⁰ William Campbell, *Unity and Diversity in Christ: Interpreting Paul in Context* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 39-66.

²¹ J. Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans After Supersessionism: The Continuation of Jewish Covenantal Identity* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), Kindle edition, chap. 8.

²² David Bolton, “Who Are You Calling ‘Weak’? A Short Critique on James Dunn’s Reading of Rom 14,1-15,6,” in *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Udo Schnelle (Walpole: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009), 617-29.

²³ I treat these two propositions as one presupposition because they are addressed by the same evidence.

himself from the Mosaic covenant.”²⁴ According to Bolton, the strength of the traditional view is grounded in whether Paul departed or remained within Judaism. In order to explore what is true about Paul, it must be asked, in the Second Temple Era, what did it mean to be “in” or “out” of Judaism?

The literature of this period suggests that what qualified someone as being within Judaism was not an adherence to a set of orthodox doctrinal creeds or observing Torah “correctly,” but an allegiance to the God of Israel as demonstrated by having a commitment to observe Torah with the intention to keep it as one best understood it. During the Second Temple Era, there were many different groups that were considered within Judaism. As mentioned by Josephus, these groups included the Pharisees, the Sadducees, Essenes,²⁵ and the Zealots.²⁶ According to James Charlesworth there were over 20 different Jewish groups during this period.²⁷ Not only were there these different groups, but there were sub-groups within these groups. Most famously, the houses of Hillel and Shammai of the Pharisaic party. Yet, the diversity does not stop there, there were also the common people who did not necessarily belong to any of these groups. These groups differed in priorities, how to interpret and apply Torah customs (halakhah), and theology. Yet, they were all considered within Judaism.

Some of the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees are summarized by Josephus, a Pharisee writing as a historian for Rome,

What I would now explain is this, that the Pharisees have delivered to the people a great many observances by succession from their fathers, which are not written in the laws of Moses; and for that reason it is that the Sadducees reject them, and say that we are to esteem those observances to be obligatory which are in the written word, but are not to observe what are derived from the tradition of our forefathers. And concerning these things it is that great disputes and differences have arisen among them, while the

²⁴ Bolton, “Who are you calling ‘weak’?,” 624.

²⁵ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.293.

²⁶ Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 268-70.

²⁷ James H. Charlesworth, *The Historical Jesus: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008), 46.

Sadducees are able to persuade none but the rich, and have not the populace obsequious to them, but the Pharisees have the multitude on their side.²⁸

The Pharisees emphasized a body of unwritten observances that were not found in the written text of the Torah that the Sadducees rejected. An example of one of these traditions is mentioned in the Gospel of Mark. The Pharisees asked Jesus why his disciples did not wash their hands according “to the tradition of the elders.”²⁹ This led to a rebuke made by Jesus that they “have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish [their] tradition!”³⁰ Even though there was lively debate and harsh accusation, these debates were understood as conflicts between Jews.

The Pharisees differed from the Sadducees not only in the observance of these “traditions of the elders” but also belief in the resurrection of the dead, angels, and spirits.³¹ Most importantly, they differed with the Sadducees on how to observe certain commandments. They disagreed on how to interpret the Torah, how to conduct purity laws, issues of the calendar, interpersonal relationship laws, and others.³² Despite these notable differences, they viewed each other as fellow Jews.³³ They still served in the Jewish courts together and Sadducees were willing to observe Pharisaic halakhah while the Pharisees held temporary power.³⁴

To make matters more complex, not only were there different major groups but there were sub-groups within these groups. As mentioned above, the House of Shammai and the House of Hillel in the Pharisaic party. Shammai and Hillel were allegedly the two leaders of the

²⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 13.239.

²⁹ Mark 7:3

³⁰ Mark 7:9

³¹ Matthew 22:23; Mark 12:18, Luke 20:27; Acts 23:6; Acts 23:8

³² Hillel Newman, *Proximity to Power and Jewish Sectarian Groups of the Ancient Period: A Review of Lifestyle, Values, and Halakhah in the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Qumran* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 193.

³³ Acts 23:7

³⁴ Newman, *Proximity to Power*, 70.

Pharisaic party one generation before Jesus.³⁵ They belonged to the same party even though they had many differences. According to the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, the Talmud records 316 disagreements between the two schools.³⁶ A list of some of their disputations are recorded in *m. Berakhot* 8:1-8. For example, “These things are [disputed] between the school of Shammai and the school of Hillel about meals: The school of Shammai says, ‘Bless the day, and afterward bless the wine.’ The school of Hillel says, ‘Bless the wine, and afterward bless the day.’” Broadly speaking, the school of Shammai approached halakhah with a tendency to be more restrictive and rigid while the school of Hillel tended toward leniency.³⁷

These disagreements included attitudes about Gentiles. A famous passage is presented in *b. Shabbat* 31a of a Gentile who asks Shammai to teach him the entire Torah and while he listened, he would stand on one foot. Shammai responded by pushing him away. This same Gentile approached Hillel with the same question. Hillel responded more caringly and said, “That which is hateful to you do not do to another; that is the entire Torah, and the rest is its interpretation. Go study.” The two houses varied in practice and the leaders varied in attitude toward Gentiles, yet they still considered each other fellow Pharisees.

Regarding the common people, Karin Zetterholm says, “[they] likely did not belong to any particular group at all. Thus, we cannot assume that a commonly accepted halakah existed, and there does not seem to have been a uniform practice even within each of the halakic systems.”³⁸ Hillel Newman notes that “the Halakhah was probably one of the main issues

³⁵ Solomon Schechter and Wilhelm Bacher, *Jewish Encyclopedia* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901), s.v. “Hillel.”

³⁶ Marcus Jastrow and S. Mendelsohn, *Ibid.*, s.v. “Bet Hillel and Bet Shammai.”

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Karin Zetterholm, “The Questions of Assumptions: Torah Observance in the First Century,” in *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*, ed. Mark D. Nanos and Magnus Zetterholm (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 91.

distinguishing these groups.”³⁹ Even the Essenes, a group that was highly unique in their theology and halakhah to the point of isolating themselves in the caves at Qumran, were considered as “in” Judaism. Daniel Boyarin writes, “the Essenes, for all their halakhic and theological deviance, apparently were not treated by anyone as heretics.”⁴⁰

Josephus was so enthusiastic about the unity among these groups that he made this exaggerated comment in *Against Apion*,

To this cause above all we owe our remarkable harmony. Unity and identity of religious belief, perfect uniformity in habits and customs, produce a very beautiful concord in human character. . . . Among us alone will be seen no difference in the conduct of our lives. With us all act alike, all profess the same doctrine about God, one which is in harmony with our Law and affirms that all things are under His eye.⁴¹

Josephus describes the differences in his writings, yet he says that there was “perfect uniformity in habits and customs” and that Jews “all act alike.” How could this be? This must mean that whether someone was “in” Judaism was not determined by how “well” or how “closely” someone observed the Torah. How “well” or how “closely” someone observed the Torah would depend on who was asked. The binding force must have been something else. Agreeing with Zetterholm, I argue that a recognized conviction to observe the Torah, as best a Jew understood how, was the criteria for who being considered within Judaism.

This is the reality in any religious, political, or intellectual sphere. There are many Protestant denominations that have different ways of conducting instructions found in the New Testament (e.g. handling finances, Church government, clothing), yet still recognize each other as Protestants who are committed to following the Bible. Among Democrats there are many different proposals for how to best solve economic inequality, yet they still recognize each other

³⁹ Newman, *Proximity to Power*, 193.

⁴⁰ Daniel Boyarin, *Borderlines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 54.

⁴¹ Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.179-81.

as Democrats committed to the Democratic agenda. Among evolutionary theorists there are many different proposals for what hypothesis best accounts for the diversity in nature, yet they still recognize each other as scientists who are committed to evolutionary theory. American historians argue over the best explanation for the Salem Witch trials, yet they still recognize each other as historians committed to doing history. There is an acknowledgement of each other as peers and a recognition that everyone has the same intention to be loyal to their religion, party, or field. If these institutions can have differences among individual members but are able to claim unity through common adherence to a higher ideal, it is possible Second Temple Judaism operated the same way. Speaking to this, Zetterholm says,

Scholars frequently talk about ‘breaking Jewish law’ as if it were something absolute like running a red light, but Jewish law is generally not as clear-cut, and the assessment of whether a given act is a violation of halakah depends on the perspective of the group and individual making the claim. . . . someone who occasionally fails to fulfill a particular commandment or violates a prohibition may nevertheless be Torah observant in the sense that he or she is committed to Jewish law and has the intention of keeping it.⁴²

Whether someone was “in” or “out” of Judaism could not have been determined by how a Jew practiced Torah, but by if a Jew had a commitment to do so. This attitude is clearly displayed in the Torah and by Jews in the Second Temple Era.

In the Hebrew Bible, Joshua 22 begins with Joshua praising the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh for having “kept all that Moses and the servant of the Lord commanded you.”⁴³ As a reward for their faithfulness, Joshua gave them their own plots of land in Gilead⁴⁴ and exhorted them to continue observing the commandments and serving the God of

⁴² Zetterholm, “Questions of Assumptions,” 91.

⁴³ Joshua 22:2

⁴⁴ Joshua 22:9

Israel.⁴⁵ Once these tribes reached their newly gifted land, they built a large altar.⁴⁶ When Joshua and the rest of the Israelites heard about this, the people of Israel prepared for war. They sent Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest, and a chief from each of the ten tribes to ask the rogue tribes, “What is this breach of faith that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning this day from following the Lord by building an altar this day in rebellion against the Lord?”⁴⁷

Israel was under the impression that the altar built by these rogue tribes was in a violation of Deuteronomy 12:1-14 which describes God telling Israel to destroy the altars located in the land of pagan nations and not to perform sacrifices like them. They were to only sacrifice to God “at the place the Lord will choose” (i.e. Jerusalem).⁴⁸ How did these accused tribes defend themselves? By explaining their intention. They said, “Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you, and between our generations after us, that we do perform the service of the Lord”⁴⁹ Phinehas responded, “Today we know that the Lord is in our midst, because you have not committed this breach of faith against the Lord.”⁵⁰ On his return to Israel, Phinehas shared this answer and it was received as “good in the eyes of the people of Israel” and they “spoke no more of making war against them.”⁵¹

Even though the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh appeared as if they broke the letter of the law, an explanation of their intention and their affirmation of a commitment to the Torah was satisfactory. Josephus confirms this as a Second Temple Jewish understanding of this passage. In his retelling of this story in *Antiquities of the Jews* he wrote that Joshua, Eleazar, and others had to “persuade [the people of Israel] first to make trial by words of

⁴⁵ Joshua 22:5

⁴⁶ Joshua 22:11

⁴⁷ Joshua 22:16

⁴⁸ Joshua 22:19-20

⁴⁹ Joshua 22:26

⁵⁰ Joshua 22:31

⁵¹ Joshua 22:33

their intention, and afterwards, if they found that their intention was evil, then only to proceed to make war upon them.”⁵² Phinehas brought the explanation of the tribes’ intention for building the altar to Joshua and he was “glad that he was under no necessity of setting them in array, or of leading them to shed blood, and make war against men of their own kindred.”⁵³ Josephus had the understanding that these ancient Israelite characters highly regarded intention and even though some tribes did some things differently, they were still “kindred.” Thus, a shared intention to observe the Torah was the unifying force for the Jewish groups in the Second Temple Era. This is what qualified a person as being “in” Judaism.

Therefore, to determine whether Paul abandoned Judaism, two questions must be asked: Was Paul a Jew? And, did Paul have a commitment to the Torah? These questions will be answered by the following sub-questions: Did Paul consider himself to be a Jew? Did other Jews consider Paul to be a fellow Jew? And, what did Paul say about Torah-observance? Exploring these questions will lead to the conclusion that Paul did in fact remain within Judaism.

Paul is clear about how he views himself. He says in Romans, “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”⁵⁴ In 2 Corinthians, “Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.”⁵⁵ To Peter in Galatians, “We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners.”⁵⁶ Paul never calls himself a Christian, nor does he say he converted to a religion called Christianity. The other canonical writers never say these things about Paul either. According to Pinchas Lapide, the only place “conversion” appears

⁵² Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5.103.

⁵³ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 5.115.

⁵⁴ Romans 11:1

⁵⁵ 2 Corinthians 11:22

⁵⁶ Galatians 2:15

in the entire New Testament is in Acts 15:3 and is specifically in reference to Gentiles who became followers of Jesus.⁵⁷ Paul clearly viewed himself as a Jew, even after he became a follower of Jesus.

In Philippians 3, after listing his credentials as a Jew, a Pharisee, a former persecutor of Jesus followers, and being blameless under the law, Paul says, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”⁵⁸ James Dunn says that this passage shows that “what [Paul] had previously regarded as most definitive of his identity (as a Jew), he no longer regarded as important.”⁵⁹ This notion is directly challenged by how Paul spoke in the passages quoted above. To make the case to the Roman community that God has not rejected Israel, Paul appeals to his identity as a Jew to show the problems of the logic he is addressing. If God has rejected Israel, then God has rejected him, a member of Israel. He used his identity to make a case for the faithfulness of God. This shows that he viewed his Jewish identity as important.

Also, Paul gives no indication that he viewed faith in Jesus and maintaining Jewish identity as incompatible characteristics. In 1 Corinthians 7:17-18, Paul highlights the importance of Jews remaining Jews after they become followers of Jesus, “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove

⁵⁷ Pinchas Lapide and Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul: Rabbi and Apostle*, trans. Lawrence W. Denef (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 47-8.

⁵⁸ Philippians 3:7-9

⁵⁹ James D.G. Dunn, “The Spread of Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome: 30-70 C.E.,” in *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2011), 132.

the marks of circumcision.” To Paul, Jesus assigned Jews their identity. How can Dunn then conclude that Paul’s belief in Jesus resulted in Paul viewing his Jewish identity as not important?

When Paul says that “whatever gain I had, I counted as loss” Paul must have been talking about his former career as a Pharisee and the version of Judaism that he was living. In Galatians 1:13-14 Paul says, “For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I was advancing in Judaism beyond many my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers.” According to Paul, he was an upstart Pharisee with a promising career ahead of him who viewed the traditions of the fathers as binding on his lifestyle but then God “[revealed] his Son” and things changed. With the existence of so many different groups and perspectives within Judaism, and his continued claim to be a Jew, there is no reason to think that in Philippians and Galatians he is saying that he left Judaism. What he left was his promising career and lifestyle as a Pharisee whose halakhic authority was the traditions of the fathers.

Now that it is understood that Paul still considered himself Jewish, it will be helpful to determine whether other Jews also considered him to be Jewish. In 2 Corinthians 11:22-26, Paul says that he endured “far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one...I have been in danger...of my fellow Jews.”⁶⁰ This passage reaffirms that Paul considered himself to be a Jew and supports that other Jews viewed him as such. According to Pamela Eisenbaum, “The fact that Paul says he was subject to forty lashes (less one) five times from synagogical authorities (2 Cor 11:24) means that the synagogical authorities as well as Paul himself

⁶⁰ 2 Corinthians 11:22-26 (New International Version)

understood that he remained subject to Jewish authority.”⁶¹ Paul receiving lashings not only signified that the Sanhedrin felt like Paul was underneath their jurisdiction and authority but Paul accepted this punishment. The only way this could happen is if both parties considered Paul as “in” Judaism.

Next, it must be determined what Paul thought about Torah-observance for himself. In Romans he says, “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.”⁶² In Galatians, “I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law.”⁶³ In these two passages, Paul intertwines circumcision, the mark of Jewish identity, with being in covenant with God and observing the Torah.

He does this again at length, and in more detail, in Romans 9:3-5, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.” Speaking in the present tense, Paul again identifies himself as an Israelite and proclaims that “the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises” still belong to him. These are all features found in the Torah.⁶⁴ Exodus 19:5 sheds lights on this passage, “Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all people, for all the earth is mine.” This is then followed by God giving Israel the Ten

⁶¹ Pamela Eisenbaum, *Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 8.

⁶² Romans 3:1-2

⁶³ Galatians 5:3

⁶⁴ Tucker, *Reading Romans After Supersessionism*, chap. 5.

Commandments. Then Deuteronomy 26:18-19, “And the Lord has declared that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he promised you, and that you are to keep his commandments...you shall be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.” Israel being God’s chosen people and his promises to them are inextricably linked to keeping the commandments. Commenting on Romans 9:4-5, Brian Tucker says, “Paul is not simply committed to his ethnic heritage but views Israel as a continuing covenant partner.”⁶⁵ Basically, to call Paul a non-Torah-observant Jew would be a contradiction and to call him a Torah-observant Jew would be redundant.

If Paul and other Jews considered him to still be “in” Judaism, who are we to say that he was not? For Mark Nanos, the conclusion is straightforward, “[Paul] certainly had not left the Jewish faith.”⁶⁶ This is significant when it comes to analyzing the rest of Paul’s writings because his identity as a Jew precedes any biblical commentary that he offers. Therefore, when reading a passage that seems to be Paul challenging the validity of the Torah, such as “nothing is unclean in itself,” rather than jumping to the conclusion that Paul left Judaism and denigrated all Torah observance, the question needs to be asked, why would a Second Temple Jew say this?

Broadly speaking, the reason why Paul was adamantly opposed to Gentiles being circumcised and why some of his letters have an edge against Torah-observance is because a vital characteristic of Paul’s understanding of the gospel message was that Gentiles can enter into covenant with the God of Israel as Gentiles. Romans 15:9-12 consists of four quotations from the Hebrew Bible that Paul viewed as prophetic of this new reality. He quotes Psalms 18:49, “For this I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.” Deuteronomy 32:43, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.” Psalms 117:1, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans*, 111.

people extol him.” Isaiah 11:10-11, “The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.” Paula Fredriksen puts it this way, “Heaven had commissioned Paul specifically to go to pagans, to turn them to Israel’s god. Like the biblical prophets whose words he drew on, Paul expected God’s kingdom to contain two human populations: Israel *and* the nations. This meant that gentiles needed to remain gentiles.”⁶⁷

Along with Fredriksen, Mark Nanos views this as the center of Paul’s theology.⁶⁸ After the resurrection, Paul believed that the “age to come” had arrived.⁶⁹ No longer must Gentiles become Jews by circumcision to enter into covenant with the God of Israel. Being in covenant with the God of Israel became available to members of all nations and they were expected to remain as such. Nanos remarks how important this is to Paul, “According to Paul’s logic, the declaration that this age has arrived with the resurrection of Christ would be undermined if those from the other nations were now to become Israelites, for then God would only be the God of Israelites, implying that God is not the only God of all the nations.”⁷⁰ This explains why Paul was so strong against circumcision and seemingly anti-Torah-observance when speaking to Gentiles. This is not to say he was against Gentiles practicing any Torah customs, but if they were to alter their national identity by becoming Jews and thus become “obligated to observe the entire law,” they would undermine Paul’s gospel. This is important to remember when reading Romans 14.

Before analyzing Romans 14, the next presupposition must be addressed. That is, that there were some followers of Jesus who did not practice any Torah customs (the strong) and that

⁶⁷ Paula Fredriksen, *Paul the Pagans’ Apostle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 164.

⁶⁸ Mark Nanos, “A Jewish View,” in *Four Views On The Apostle Paul*, ed. Stanley N. Gudry and Michael F. Bird (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 171.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

the weak must include Jewish followers of Jesus. Mark Kinzer comments on the prevalence of this interpretation, “most commentators understand the ‘weak’ to be Torah-observant Jewish Yeshua-believers (along with some Gentile supporters), and the ‘strong’ to be Torah-free Gentile Yeshua-believers (along with some enlightened Jews, such as Paul).”⁷¹ He notices that scholars believe there were “Torah-free” Jesus followers who presumably did not practice any Torah customs whatsoever.

So, is it true that there were some followers of Jesus who did not practice any Torah customs, whether Jewish or Gentile? At the time of Paul writing this letter in the mid-50s, the answer is likely that such a follower of Jesus was extremely rare, if present at all. This is because in ancient Rome, as will be shown, many Romans were intrigued by Torah customs to the point of adopting some for themselves. Others went so far as to include worshipping the God of Israel either as a part of their pantheon or exclusively.⁷² Romans with this attitude likely made up (at least) the bulk of Gentiles who became followers of Jesus during this time period because they would have been most ready to receive the message Paul was preaching.

The evidence for Romans who practiced Torah customs is widespread. The Hellenistic Jewish author, Philo of Alexandria, said, “[Jewish customs] attract and win the attention . . . of the whole inhabited world from end to end.”⁷³ This is similar to what we find written by

Josephus,

The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious observances; and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread, and where the fasts and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Mark Kinzer, *Postmissionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 75.

⁷² Fredriksen, *Paul the Pagans' Apostle*, 112.

⁷³ Philo of Alexandria, *The Life of Moses*, 2.4.

⁷⁴ Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.39.

Although these claims seem like attempts by Jewish authors to make Judaism seem like a worldwide phenomenon, they were not spoken within some validity. First century Roman author, Epictetus noticed that, “whenever we see a man halting between two faiths, we are in the habit of saying, ‘He is not a Jew, he is only acting the part.’”⁷⁵ This was occurring so often that Seneca the Younger felt compelled to complain that “the customs of that most accursed nation [the Jews] have gained such strength that they have been now received in all lands. The conquered have given laws to the conquerors.”⁷⁶ These are just a few examples from the literature that attests to Gentiles practicing Torah customs during this time period.⁷⁷

This literary evidence agrees with what appears to be a recognized category of Gentiles who had a special loyalty to the Torah and were active in the synagogues without becoming full converts to Judaism. This group of people are referred to by scholars as “God-fearers.” Oskar Skarsaune points to many different instances in the Book of Acts where this category of person appears (Acts 10:2, 3, 22, 30; 13:16, 26, 48; 14:1; 16:14; 17:4, 12; 18:4, 7).⁷⁸ Acts 10:22 refers to a Roman centurion, Cornelius, who reportedly was one of the first Gentiles to come to believe in Jesus. He was referred to as “an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation.”⁷⁹ The author of Acts said that he was “a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms generously to the people, and prayed continually to God.”⁸⁰ Though Cornelius was a Roman centurion, he honored the God of Israel with his prayers and with his finances to the point of being commended by the Jewish community. To an extent, this would qualify as “Judaizing.” Judaizing did not only mean full conversion to Judaism, it could also be

⁷⁵ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 2.9.

⁷⁶ Seneca the Younger, as quoted by Augustine, *City of God*, 6.11.

⁷⁷ Das, *Solving the Romans Debate*, 111-113.

⁷⁸ Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences On Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 171-3.

⁷⁹ Acts 10:22

⁸⁰ Acts 10:2-4

as small a step as a Roman including the God of Israel in their pantheon of gods.⁸¹ Though it appears that Cornelius did more than just that. The extent of which Cornelius practiced Torah customs is unknown, but if Roman citizens admired some Torah customs enough to practice them, how much more would Romans who feared the God of Israel, like Cornelius, have been enthusiastic about practicing them?

The characteristics of Cornelius correspond strongly with archaeological findings. In 1987, Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum wrote about various lists of names inscribed on a 2.8-meter-tall marble block found outside of a synagogue at Aphrodisias in Asia Minor.⁸² Portions of these lists are entitled “God-worshippers” and followed by a list of non-Jewish names.⁸³ According to Dietrich-Alex Koch, in his re-analysis of the archaeological evidence concerning God-fearers, there are two independent lists on the same block with the earliest inscriptions dated to the 4th Century AD and the later list dated to the 5th Century AD.⁸⁴ Koch concludes that this is a list of Jews and Gentiles who donated to the synagogue, just like Cornelius.⁸⁵ Koch describes the relationship between these Gentiles and the synagogue as ranging from a simple social commitment to various degrees of religious commitment, including up to an “imitation of Jewish practices such as Sabbath-observance or the observance of fasting or dietary laws.”⁸⁶ Andrew Das reports, “Most scholars in recent years have concluded that the inscriptional evidence does indeed support the category of ‘God-fearer.’”⁸⁷

⁸¹ Fredrickson, *Paul the Pagans' Apostle*, 113.

⁸² Dietrich-Alex Koch, “The God-fearers Between Facts and Fiction: Two Theosebeis-inscriptions from Aphrodisias and Their Bearing for the New Testament,” *Studia Theologica* 60, no. 1 (March 2006): 63.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 64-6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁸⁷ Das, *Solving the Romans Debate*, 77.

Further evidence for closeness between Jews and Gentiles is Acts 13:16 which portrays Paul as addressing a synagogue with the greeting, “Men of Israel and you who fear God, listen” and Acts 14:1, “Now at Iconium they entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of Jews and Greeks believed.” These examples show that Gentiles of a certain standing were accepted and active in the synagogue while not going through a full conversion to Judaism. According to Scot McKnight, “[T]here is evidence for a rather consistent presence of ‘God-fearers,’ or Jewish sympathizers, in Rome from the earliest times.”⁸⁸ Louis Feldman says, “We have more information about ‘sympathizers’ in Rome than we do for any other region in the ancient world.”⁸⁹ These factors make them the most likely recipients for Paul’s gospel. The significance of this is not lost on no less an authority than James Dunn,

In each city Paul usually made a point of preaching the good news of Messiah Jesus in the synagogue, or one of the synagogues. This is certainly what Luke reports. Doubt is often raised on this point, on the assumption that the apostle to the gentiles would have preferred a different setting in which to preach his gospel. But the objection ignores the fact that many gentiles were attracted by Judaism and were willing to ‘Judaize’ to some extent by observing Jewish feasts and attending Sabbath gatherings in the synagogue; they are usually known as ‘Godfearers,’ to whom the Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus, and recent inscriptional evidence refer. Such Godfearers, who had Judaized but held back from becoming proselytes, would likely be the gentiles most open to and attracted by a form of Judaism that did not demand circumcision.⁹⁰

It was these God-fearers that likely made up most of the early Gentile population of Jesus followers in Rome. According to William Campbell, “The growing consensus is that almost all the Roman Christians had had contact with Judaism at some point in their lives.”⁹¹ What Gentiles would be quicker to accept an invitation into the covenant with the God of Israel than Gentiles

⁸⁸ Louis H. Feldman, *Jew & Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 344, quoted in Das, *Solving the Romans Debate*, 79.

⁸⁹ Scot McKnight, *A Light Among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 344, quoted in Das, *Solving the Romans Debate*, 79.

⁹⁰ Dunn, “The Spread of Christianity,” 121.

⁹¹ Campbell, *Unity and Diversity in Christ*, 47.

who already had some level of reverence for him and practiced his suggested customs?

Therefore, it is an overstatement for scholars like C.K. Barrett to say that the strong were “completely uninhibited by relics of a pagan or Jewish past . . . Like Paul himself (who undoubtedly is one of the ‘strong’).”⁹² To say that the strong were “Torah-free” is said with too much confidence. This also largely affects the assumption that the weak must be Jewish due to their scrupulous Torah observance. This can no longer be viewed as a necessary conclusion. It is possible that a group of overzealous Gentiles were scrupulously practicing Torah customs. In fact, it is more likely that both groups in Romans 14 were exclusively Gentile, as will be shown below.

The traditional interpretation of this passage is too simplistic and is incorrect on its assumptions. How can it be said that Paul was abolishing kosher law when he continued to observe kosher law himself? How can it be said that the strong were “Torah-free,” and that the weak must be Jews because they observed Torah customs when seemingly most followers of Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, would have likely been practicing Torah customs to some degree? Now it is understood that Paul remained Torah-observant and was strong and any kind of Jesus follower could possibly have been in the weak group. With these notions in mind, a more precise examination of Romans 14 can be conducted.

First, the claim that the weak observed the seventh-day Sabbath in contrast to the strong cannot be sustained because of the vague nature of Paul’s statement and the presence of a halakhic debate in which it could be framed. In Romans 14, Paul does not explicitly mention the Sabbath but says, “One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind.”⁹³ It is usually assumed that the

⁹² Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 237.

⁹³ Romans 14:5

scrupulous, Torah-observant weak must still be worshipping on the Sabbath, but Paul does not mention Sabbath and does not assign this characteristic directly to one of the groups. In agreement with Paul Sampley, “Even if a modern interpreter insisted on carrying Paul’s mention of weak and strong in 14:1-2 into the topic of honoring days, it is not a priori clear who better be identified as the weak person: the one who reckons all days the same or the one who honors special days.”⁹⁴ The strong group could have been the ones who “esteems one day as better than another.”⁹⁵ The weakness of the traditional interpretation is further perpetuated when there is evidence that what Paul is describing was potentially a debate within Judaism. An additional disagreement between Hillel and Shammai about this is recorded in the Talmud,

They said about Shammai the Elder that all his days he would eat in honor of Shabbat. How so? If he found a choice animal, he would say: This is for Shabbat. If he subsequently found another one choicer than it, he would set aside the second for Shabbat and eat the first. He would eat the first to leave the better-quality animal for Shabbat, which continually rendered his eating an act of honoring Shabbat. However, Hillel the Elder had a different trait, that all his actions, including those on a weekday, were for the sake of Heaven, as it is stated: “Blessed be the Lord, day by day; He bears our burden, our God who is our salvation; Selah” (Psalms 68:20), meaning that God gives a blessing for each and every day . . . Beit Shammai say: From the first day of the week, Sunday, start preparing already for your Shabbat. And Beit Hillel say: “Blessed be the Lord, day by day.”⁹⁶

Rather than assuming the division was between Sabbath observance versus Sabbath neglect, the division could have been about how each group viewed food in relation to the Sabbath or every day of the week. This would maintain the context of food being the main Torah custom addressed in the passage and account for the pervasiveness of Sabbath observance among both Jews and Gentiles.

⁹⁴ Paul Sampley, “The Weak and the Strong: Paul’s Careful and Crafty Rhetorical Strategy,” in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. Larry Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 41.

⁹⁵ Romans 14:5

⁹⁶ *b. Beitzah* 16a.

Regarding the identification of the two groups, it is more reasonable to conclude that the weak and the strong in Rome were exclusively Gentile and that being strong was not defined by being Gentile and Torah-free but by having a correct halakhic approach to meat and understanding that Gentiles had no obligation to kosher law. Consequently, being weak was not defined by being Jewish and Torah-observant but by having an incorrect halakhic approach to meat and believing that Gentiles had an obligation to keep kosher law. Paul's problem with the groups was that they differed in understanding and "despised" and "judged" one another for it. This follows from an examination of what Paul means when he says, "nothing is unclean in itself" and that "everything is indeed clean."

It is typical for these verses to be cited to show that Paul was declaring kosher law irrelevant or as done away with.⁹⁷ Paul declared in Romans 14:14 that, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean." Then Romans 14:20, "Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats." For many scholars, such as Arnold Fruchtenbaum, these verses are clear enough to say that Paul was saying that now "there is . . . no dietary code."⁹⁸ David Rudolph comments on this position, "the traditional reading of Rom. 14:14, 20 has been normative for so long that many studies of the passage seem to begin with the assumption that the traditional interpretation has been conclusively established, and then, proceed to make the data conform to the law-free portrait of Paul."⁹⁹ This demonstrates how significant the interplay between presupposing Paul was no

⁹⁷ Jurgen Becker, *Paul: Apostle to the Gentiles*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 98.

⁹⁸ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, "Messianic Congregations May Exist Within the Body of Messiah, As Long as They Don't Function Contrary to the New Testament," in *How Jewish is Christianity?: 2 Views on the Messianic Movement*, ed. Stanley Gudry and Louis Goldberg (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 121.

⁹⁹ Rudolph, "Paul and the Food Laws," 152.

longer Torah-observant with the traditional reading of this passage. Now that we can be confident that Paul remained Torah-observant, it is time to return to the question, why would a Second Temple Jew say that “nothing is unclean in itself”?

First, consider the qualifying statement Paul provides in Romans 14:14. He says that food should not be considered unclean “in itself.” On its own merit, it can be concluded that Paul was suggesting that food was not intrinsically unclean. There is nothing ontologically unclean with pork ribs, so to speak. Upon investigation into the Jewish literature, we find that this line of thinking was present during the Second Temple Era.¹⁰⁰ Yochanan ben Zakkai, a contemporary of Paul, was reported to have had a conversation with a pagan who was questioning the effectiveness of the purity rituals described in the Torah. When Zakkai’s students asked him how he answered the man, he said, “By your life, nor does the body make impure, nor does the water make pure, but it is an enactment of the Holy One Blessed be He!” God responded with approval, “The Holy One Blessed be He said: A decree have I decreed an enactment have I enacted, and you are not allowed to transgress my enactment, ‘This is a decree of the law’ (Num. 19:1).”¹⁰¹ Eric Ottenheijm says that this passage demonstrates that “the Hillelite rationalized halakhic logic presupposes that impurity is not an external, objective force.”¹⁰² Rudolph says, “Paul was not making a radical statement when he wrote that ‘nothing is unclean in itself.’ On the contrary, he was communicating a normative Hillelite perspective on ritual purity that already had a degree of acceptance in the wider Jewish Diaspora.”¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Find this and additional arguments look to David Rudolph’s article, “Paul and the Food Laws: A Reassessment of Romans 14:14, 20,” as cited in note 17.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 160.

¹⁰² Eric Ottenheijm, “Impurity Between Intention and Deed: Purity Disputes in First Century Judaism and in the New Testament,” in *Purity and Holiness: The Heritage of Leviticus*, ed. M. J. H. M. Poorthuis and J. Schwartz (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 141-2, quoted in Rudolph, “Paul and the Food Laws,” 158.

¹⁰³ Rudolph, “Paul and the Food Laws,” 161.

This is also what Paul means when he says, “Everything is indeed clean.” Kathy Ehrensperger comments, “‘Everything is indeed pure’ refers to Jewish perceptions of purity and impurity as non-ontological categories, but as God’s ordinances, his Torah for his people.”¹⁰⁴ She provides support for this position by appealing to the instructions concerning kosher law found in Leviticus 11 where God emphasizes that certain foods are “impure for you,” “unclean for you,” and “untouchable for you.”¹⁰⁵ Certain meats were unclean for Jewish people only. This was understood to be the case simply because God declared it so, not because of anything about the food “in itself.”

This is one of the reasons why Paul was justified in claiming that Gentiles do not need to follow this portion of the Torah.¹⁰⁶ If meat was in fact intrinsically unclean, then why would Paul not obligate Gentiles to abstain? These examples found in Jewish literature and Jewish logic must be accounted for. Rudolph rightly claims, “the textual argument for the traditional interpretation of Rom. 14:14, 20 only appears weighty when the Second Temple Jewish background is disregarded.”¹⁰⁷ Therefore, Paul was not declaring that kosher law had been done away with and that all meat should be eaten by everybody, but that the strong who “eat everything” have every right to do so because they are Gentiles. This is how Paul was able to identify himself as among the strong because being in that group was not defined by ethnicity or practice but by understanding that “nothing is unclean in itself” and that Gentiles had no obligation to kosher law.

¹⁰⁴ Kathy Ehrensperger, “‘Called to be Saints’ – The Identity-Shaping Dimensions of Paul’s Priestly Discourse in Romans,” in *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation: Essays in Honour of William S. Campbell*, ed. Kathy Ehrensperger and J. Brian Tucker (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 101, 105-6, quoted in Rudolph, “Paul and the Food Laws,” 161.

¹⁰⁵ Leviticus 11:4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 10-11, 12, 23

¹⁰⁶ Ehrensperger, “Called to be Saints,” 106.

¹⁰⁷ Rudolph, “Paul and the Food Laws,” 161.

So, if an individual's placement in one of these two groups was based on understanding and not ethnicity, how can it be said with confidence that both groups in Rome were exclusively Gentile? First, it is commonly held that Gentiles were at least the primary audience of Romans.¹⁰⁸ Reidar Hvalvik goes so far as to say, "There can thus be no doubt: when writing to the Romans, Paul primarily has Gentile believers in mind."¹⁰⁹ Paul Minear agrees, "It is almost certain that Gentile Christians were the majority among the churches of Rome and that this letter is more strongly slanted towards them."¹¹⁰ Second, Paul conspicuously does not identify the ethnicity of these groups which could suggest that both groups were the same ethnicity because it was unnecessary to make a distinction.¹¹¹ Third, we know that the strong in Rome did in fact eat everything and that the weak abstained and were convinced that the strong had to abstain as well. Both of these were unlikely positions to be held by Jews. They likely would have understood, just like Paul, that they continued to have an obligation to observe kosher law and could not eat everything.

This makes Gentiles the likely candidates for both groups. The strong must have been Gentile because they did eat everything. With the strong being Gentile, it is unlikely that a Jewish group would be judging Gentiles for not keeping kosher law because they would have understood that Gentiles did not have an obligation to keep it. Or, they at least would have been more tolerant of differing halakhic perspective, especially with Gentiles involved.¹¹² This makes

¹⁰⁸ The following argument will not deny that there were Jewish members of the Roman community, but it will deny that Jews were members of the strong or the weak group.

¹⁰⁹ Reidar Hvalvik, "Jewish Believers and Jewish Influence in the Roman Church Until the Early Second Century," in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 192.

¹¹⁰ Paul Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (Naperville: Alec R. Allenson Inc., 1971), 14.

¹¹¹ It also tells us that ethnicity was not Paul's concern.

¹¹² However, when considered conceptually, Jews are not excluded from the weak by necessity. I am relying on the combination of these factors to say that, in this historical situation in Rome, Gentiles are the likely candidate for being the weak.

Jews less likely to be the weak. God-fearers who entered into the covenant would have their enthusiasm for the Torah increase even more and it could have increased to the point of being much too strict because they did not have as much understanding as Paul and the other Jews would have. Thus, it is more likely that both groups were made up of Gentiles.

In sum, the interpretation of Romans 14:1-15:13, that the weak were mostly Jewish Jesus followers who still observed the Torah and that the strong were mostly Gentile Jesus followers (and Paul) who were Torah-free, is untenable once the presuppositions are challenged. The presupposition that Paul abandoned Judaism collapses after establishing what it meant to be considered “in” Judaism. Paul only had to be Jewish with a commitment to observe the Torah and the intention to observe it as best he understood how. He identified as a Jew, was recognized as a Jew by other Jews, and intimately linked being Jewish and Torah-observance together. He did not have a problem with anyone practicing Torah customs, he had a problem with the idea that Gentiles must become Jews to enter into covenant with the God of Israel in the new age.

The presupposition that there were Torah-free Gentiles, and that the weak must have been Jews, breaks down after recognizing the prevalence of Gentiles practicing Torah-customs in Rome. When connected with the God-fearers, who Paul preached to, the likelihood that they practiced Torah customs increases all the more. Rather than assuming that Paul placed himself in the strong group because he was Torah-free and that anyone practicing Torah customs were Jews, the question should be asked, why would a Second Temple Jew say, “nothing is unclean in itself”? This can be done without being constrained by the notion that those who practiced Torah customs must be Jews.

In light of understanding that Paul remained within Judaism, Romans 14:14, 20 are able to be considered as consistent with a prevalent Jewish halakhic understanding to conclude that

Paul was simply saying that meat is not intrinsically unclean. Anyone who did not understand this halakhic principle, which led them to the conclusion that Gentiles must be obligated to kosher law, would qualify for the weak group. After considering the combination of factors that the strong ate everything, Gentiles made up the majority of the population in the Roman community, the audience of Romans was to the Gentiles, and Jews would likely have had correct halakhic understanding and tolerance, it can confidently be concluded that the members of both groups were exclusively Gentiles.

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