

Paul's Interlocutor in Romans: The Problem of Identification

Runar M. Thorsteinsson, Matthew Thiessen, and
Rafael Rodríguez

In the middle of writing my dissertation on circumcision and conversion in early Judaism and Luke-Acts, I (Matthew) suddenly wondered whether I had stumbled upon a novel interpretation of Rom 2:17–29, one of the more troublesome passages in Paul's writings. I was in the midst of researching and writing about the fact that some Jews in the Second Temple period rejected the possibility that gentiles could become Jews through the rite of circumcision and observance of the Jewish law. In other words, there might be instances of people who were of non-Jewish descent who believed themselves to be Jews—and perhaps were even thought to be Jews by many others Jews—whose

Jewishness was questioned by yet other Jews. Could Paul possibly have hinted at this same skepticism of a gentile convert's Jewishness in his reference to the person who calls himself a Jew [σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπωνομάζῃ] in Rom 2:17?

I consulted the major commentaries on Romans and found no interpreter who considered this possibility. All appeared to take Paul's words to address a Jew—the “typical Jew” or a Jewish teacher of gentiles, but a Jew, nonetheless. Fortunately, I did not stop there, even though the question was what one of my former professors calls “a rabbit hole”—a question that appears interesting but leads one away from the work one ought to be doing. Searching Duke University's library catalogue, I stumbled onto Runar Thorsteinsson's book devoted to the topic of Paul's interlocutor in Romans 2. Surely Thorsteinsson would give me the definitive answer on whether anyone had ever argued that Rom 2:17 refers to a judaizing gentile. To my surprise, he made precisely this argument, and he did so in far greater detail than I could have imagined.

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I (Rafael) was preparing a new graduate course on Paul's letter to the Romans. I had taught Romans before, but as I worked through the text anew for the first time in a number of years, I found that I had changed my mind about a fairly significant point. Whereas I previously had taught that Paul's interlocutor in Rom 2:1–16 was a judgmental—even hypocritical—Jew, I now found myself agreeing with those commentators who read Paul's second-person-singular rhetoric as directed against a gentile interlocutor. I was persuaded not by any particular commentator who argued the point—though I now find Stanley Stowers's argument very convincing indeed.¹ Instead, I simply read the text linearly, from front to back. The movement from Romans 1 into Romans 2 clearly indicates a strong link between those

1. See Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 100–109.

Paul describes in the earlier chapter and the interlocutor Paul addresses in the latter.

When I arrived at Rom 2:17, the moment where Paul resumes his direct address to his interlocutor (Εἰ δὲ σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ἐπονομάζῃ . . .), I wondered if, perhaps, Paul might still be addressing the same interlocutor he had addressed earlier in Romans 2 (ἀναπολόγητος εἶ, ὃ ἄνθρωπε πᾶς ὁ κρίνων . . .). The difference did not seem to matter much at the time, and I was wary of offering a new reading that did not find any support—so I thought at the time—among Pauline and Romans scholars. I tentatively decided to read Rom 2:17–29 in terms of a *gentile* interlocutor, out of curiosity more than anything else. I did not, at that time, realize the argument already had been made. I first encountered Runar Thorsteinsson's monograph in Robert Jewett's comments on Paul's rhetorical question in Rom 3:1 (Τί οὖν τὸ περισσὸν τοῦ Ἰουδαίου). Jewett dismisses Thorsteinsson's thesis swiftly, in a footnote: "This rhetorical question [viz. Rom 3:1] renders implausible the suggestion by Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 197–231, that the interlocutor is a Gentile claiming to be a Jew."² I scribbled in the margin next to Jewett's footnote: **get this*. And I continued working through Romans on my own, unaware of Thorsteinsson's argument from Hellenistic epistolographical uses of diatribe.

I quickly discovered that reading Paul's interlocutor as a judaizing gentile—at the time, I called him a "gentile proselyte to Judaism"—bears enormous exegetical consequences for how one reads the rest of Romans.³ In 2012, I presented a paper at the Paul Seminar of the British New Testament Conference that sought to demonstrate how our reading of Paul's use of νόμος might change if we follow Thorsteinsson.⁴ In the discussion after the papers, Matthew Novenson

2. Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 241n18. Jewett refers to Thorsteinsson's monograph eight times before this reference and three more times after it. This, however, is the only reference that explicitly deals with Thorsteinsson's specific reading of Rom 2:17–29 (as Thiessen notes, below).

3. I have since published my reading of Romans as *If You Call Yourself a Jew: Reappraising Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

4. Rafael Rodríguez, "If You Depend upon the Law': Diatribe and the Rhetoric of Nomos in Romans 1–4" (presented at the Paul Seminar of the British New Testament Conference, London, September 7, 2012).

informed me of Matthew Thiessen's argument, presented at the 2011 SBL Annual Meeting, that Paul viewed gentile circumcision as itself a violation of the rite of circumcision.⁵ I contacted Thiessen after the conference, and in late September 2013 I suggested to him the possibility of co-editing a volume that highlighted and advocated for a reading of Paul's interlocutor and of Romans as a whole that grew out of Thorsteinsson's thesis. The present volume is the result.

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It is now just over a decade since I (Runar) published my dissertation, *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2*, in which I proposed a new reading of Paul's letter to the Romans, especially Romans 2.⁶ As the title suggests, the focus is aimed at the person or persons to whom Paul turns in chapter two, especially in Rom 2:1–5 and 2:17–29. Paul's use of the second-person singular ("you") characterizes both passages, where Paul speaks to an individual whom he criticizes heavily for being inconsistent in his thought as well as behavior.

But who are these individuals, and how many of them does Paul imagine? Does Paul address a single individual throughout the chapter? Or, is there a change of interlocutors at Rom 2:17? Scholars are divided when it comes to answering these questions. Current research provides two main options. According to the first alternative, there is but one person addressed in Romans 2: an ethnic Jew.⁷ According to the second alternative, there are two kinds of persons in the chapter: a gentile, or, more generally, a "human being" in 2:1–5 (and in 2:1–16, more broadly), and a Jew in 2:17–29.⁸ The first

5. Now published as Matthew Thiessen, "Paul's Argument against Gentile Circumcision in Romans 2:17–29," *NovT* 56 (2014): 373–91. See also Thiessen's chapter in the present volume.

6. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*, ConBNT 40 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2003; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015).

7. So, e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, WBC 38A (Nashville: Nelson, 1988), 108; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 297.

8. So, e.g., Neil Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans: Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul's Dialogue with Judaism*, JSNTSup 45 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 127; Stowers, *Rereading of Romans*, 100–101, 143–45.

alternative—that Paul’s dialogue is with a Jew throughout the chapter—is more common than the second and is endorsed by a long tradition of interpretation. According to this tradition, Romans 2 contains Paul’s fiercest attack against Jews and Judaism. Few, however, realize that the tradition of reading a Jewish interlocutor in Rom 2:1–5 is a relatively recent phenomenon, perhaps because this tradition, despite being recent, has been so widely held. In contrast to recent interpreters, Origen (d. 254), as one example, does not even mention such a reading in his commentary on Paul’s letter.⁹

A significant point in all of this is the identity of the persons described in the preceding passage, Rom 1:18–32.¹⁰ Romans 2 begins with the word *διό* (“therefore”). Even if *διό* is a small word, it is of great importance for the identification of the interlocutor in 2:1–5. The use of *διό* means that Rom 2:1 offers an inference drawn from the preceding verses. When Paul says to his interlocutor: “*Therefore* you are without excuse,” the reason for the person being without excuse is found in the preceding text. *Διό* implies that the reason is already given.

We can present in tabular form the two alternatives for reading Paul’s interlocutor in Romans 2 that we have already described, including how Paul’s interlocutor relates to the persons described in Rom 1:18–32:

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|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|-----------------------|---|---|---|---------|
| 1:18–32 | → | → | → | → | 2:1–5 | → | → | → | 2:17–29 |
| (1) gentiles and Jews | | | | ← | a Jew | | | ← | a Jew |
| (2) gentiles/humanity | | | → | | a gentile/human being | | | ≠ | a Jew |

Table 1. Earlier attempts to identify Paul’s interlocutor(s) in Romans 2.

The point of departure for the first model is that the interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 is a Jew (cf. 2:17: “But if you call yourself a Jew . . .”). Since the person addressed in 2:1–5 appears to be the same as in 2:17, this person, it is claimed, must also be a Jew. Most of those who follow

9. Similarly, see John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans*, Homily 6 (NPNF¹ 11:368).
 10. For discussion of Rom 1:18–32, see Magnus Zetterholm’s chapter in the present volume.

this reading argue that the persons described in 1:18–32 are primarily gentiles. However, because of Paul's use of *διό* in 2:1, commentators often infer that Paul must also be describing (at least some) Jews in Rom 1:18–32.¹¹

The second model approaches the text in an entirely different manner. The point of departure is now found in Rom 1:18–32. The persons who are described there are either gentiles or human beings in general (including Jews). Paul's use of *διό*, among other things, suggests that the interlocutor should be either a gentile or a "human being."¹² Since, however, the person addressed in Rom 2:17–29 is a Jew, there is a shift of interlocutors at 2:17.

The main weakness of the first model is that interpreters read the text back-to-front: from the Jew in 2:17 backward to a Jew in 2:1, and then, mostly because of *διό* in 2:1, back to the persons described in 1:18–32, among whom, one now has to place (at least some) Jews. Those who argue for the second model argue that this is a misguided and misleading approach to the problem. One should rather read the text *linearly*, that is to say, from the beginning forward. That seems to be a fair claim. Texts are usually read linearly, especially epistolary texts. But those who advocate the latter model have, nevertheless, been unsuccessful in explaining the relationship between the interlocutors in 2:1–5 and 2:17–29. There is, in fact, much in the text that suggests that the interlocutors in 2:1–5 and 2:17–29 are one and the same.

Is there a third solution to the problem? Yes, there is another way to read the text—a way which demands that one poses an important, but neglected question: is one so certain that Paul's interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 is a Jew?

11. Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 1:137–42.
12. Jewett, for example, rightly gives *διό* its "full logical sense," but then argues, "The reduction of the conjunction to a nonlogical transition rests on a misperception of 1:18–32 as pertaining only to Gentiles, whereas it includes 'all impiety and unrighteousness of humans who by unrighteousness are suppressing the truth' (1:18)"; see Jewett, *Romans*, 196. Jewett, therefore, finds himself confirmed in his earlier judgment, that "the formulation with 'all' [in Rom 1:18] indicates that Paul wishes to insinuate that *Jews as well as Romans, Greeks, and barbarians* are being held responsible" (*ibid.*, 152; emphasis added).

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As I (Matthew) said above, I was surprised to discover that someone had already argued, in considerable detail, that Paul's interlocutor in Rom 2:17–29 was a judaizing gentile. Despite the fact that the book was some seven years old when I first came across it, it had caused little more than a blip, as far as I could tell, in the secondary literature on Romans and, more generally, on Paul. That situation continues to persist today—thirteen years after its publication. For instance, Jewett's magisterial *Hermeneia* commentary on Romans mentions Thorsteinsson's monograph a number of times, but only once in relation to his treatment of Rom 2:17–29.¹³ Douglas A. Campbell's lengthy monograph on justification theory in Paul deals extensively with the interlocutor and diatribe of Romans 1–4, yet refers to Thorsteinsson's book just once—and this, merely in passing, despite the potential relevance of Thorsteinsson's claims for the central thesis of Campbell's work on the diatribe in Romans.¹⁴ Finally, N. T. Wright's two-volume treatment of Paul's theology does not once refer to this work—again, despite the implications it might have for Wright's reading of Paul.¹⁵

To be sure, the secondary literature on Paul's writings is, frankly put, too voluminous for any one scholar to take account of, and so, the observation that these particular scholars do not obviously reckon with Runar's novel thesis is not meant to criticize them for what they have not read or adequately addressed in secondary scholarship. Even so, in spite of the considerable size of Jewett's commentary and the monographs of Campbell and Wright (all three works total over four thousand pages), only one sentence is devoted to even mentioning

13. Jewett (*Romans*, 241n18) dismisses Thorsteinsson's thesis about Rom 2:17–29 on the sole basis of Paul's rhetorical question in Rom 3:1: "What, then, is the advantage of being a Jew?" As Joshua D. Garroway's chapter in the present volume demonstrates, though, this precise question and its larger context support Thorsteinsson's interpretation.

14. Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 1079n29.

15. N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols., COQG 4 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

Runar's central thesis about the identity of Paul's interlocutor. This neglect is representative of the larger field. To my knowledge, only a few scholars have written reviews of *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2*—most importantly, Stanley K. Stowers, the doyen of, among other things, scholarship on the diatribe in Paul's letter to the Romans.¹⁶

Whatever the reason for the silence surrounding Thorsteinsson's book, in 2011, I felt that North American scholarship, in particular, needed to hear this particular thesis anew. So, I presented my own reading of Rom 2:17–29, based heavily on Thorsteinsson's thesis, at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco.¹⁷ The presentation of that paper resulted in the discovery of a few more like-minded interpreters of Paul, including Rafael Rodríguez, who was, at that time, completing a monograph on Romans that also took its cue from Thorsteinsson.¹⁸ In the early autumn of 2013, Rafael pitched the idea of co-editing a volume that would build upon and expand Thorsteinsson's work. It seemed audacious—would we be able to find enough people who both knew Thorsteinsson's work and agreed with it? The answer, as you can see, is yes. While the essays in this volume do not follow him at every point, his overall argument functions as the foundation upon which all these essays rest. Before turning to the contents of the present edited volume, it will be necessary to outline Thorsteinsson's main arguments.¹⁹

The Argument of *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2*

Thorsteinsson begins his volume by situating Paul's letter to the Romans within the context of ancient letter writing. He argues that ancient letters followed certain basic conventions and that such

16. See Stanley K. Stowers's review of Runar Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2*, *JTS* 56 (2005): 561–65. Other reviewers include Andrie du Toit (*Neot* 38 [2004]: 152–54); James Sweeney (*RBL* 12 [2004], http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4138_4029.pdf); Jonas Holmstrand (*SEÅ* 69 [2004]: 312–16); Friedrich Wilhelm Horn (*TLZ* 130 [2005]: 786–89); Bryan Lee (*RBL* 13 [2005], http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4138_4610.pdf); and Edmond Farahian (*Greg* 86 [2005]: 439).

17. Now published as Thiessen, "Paul's Argument."

18. See Rodríguez, *If You Call Yourself a Jew*.

19. The remainder of this introductory chapter avoids the first-person authorial voices used thus far.

conventions enabled readers of letters to understand the author's intentions. He believes one must start with the whole of Romans before one can properly understand the function of the various parts of the letter, including Rom 2:17-29. Thorsteinsson calls this a "top-down" approach to the text, which moves from the whole to the parts. When he refers to the "whole," he has in mind aspects such as the epistolary structure of Romans, the literary character of the letter, the situation in which the letter was written, and the relationship between the letter's sender and recipients. Thorsteinsson uses his first chapter to address two issues in particular: the epistolary structure of Romans, in which he briefly describes the epistolary opening, body, and closing; and the epistolary setting of Romans, in which he describes the relationship between the type of letter Romans is and the specific setting in which it was written.

In his investigation of specific epistolary features in Romans, which he compares to a great number of ancient letters of various kinds, Thorsteinsson concludes that Paul's choice and use of well-known epistolary formulations have their closest parallels in official correspondence, such as diplomatic, royal, and administrative letters. Paul's way of expressing himself through standard epistolary formulations suggests a hierarchical relationship between the apostle and his audience, a relationship that is determined by Paul's mission to proclaim God's good news to gentiles. The content of Romans is actually grounded in Paul's relationship to his audience: the letter is, in effect, Paul's proclamation of the good news. Everything suggests that the letter was written to a particular, contemporary group of people in Rome. There is, therefore, no good reason to doubt that the letter was written precisely to the people who are identified in the letter as its recipients.

Thorsteinsson stresses that, while there are similarities between ancient letters and speeches, one must be careful not to blithely equate the two. He suggests that Artemon, the editor of Aristotle's letters, who believed that "a letter ought to be written in the same manner as a dialogue [διάλογον]," has partially led modern interpreters astray. In

order to give balance to Artemon's sentiments, he notes that at some point between the third and first centuries BCE Demetrius stressed the differences between these two modes of communication. Thorsteinsson concludes, "letters from Greco-Roman antiquity should be taken for what they are, viz., letters, and, as a *point of departure*, they should be analyzed with respect to prevailing *epistolary* practices" and not solely in light of rhetorical conventions of speech.²⁰

At the same time, he acknowledges that ancient epistolary theorists paid little attention to establishing clear norms, leaving a great degree of flexibility in order to meet the variegated demands of letter writing. In fact, the structure of letters was relatively basic, consisting of an opening, a body, and a closing.²¹ Only the opening was obligatory, identifying the sender in the nominative case, the recipient in the dative, and usually conveying some sort of salutation: "A (nom.) to B (dat.), greeting [*χαίρειν*]" (for example, Pseudo-Libanius, *Ep. Char.* 51).²² To these required components of an opening, letter writers often attached both health wishes and prayers. The second common component of a letter—the body—dealt with the reason the sender wrote the letter, although this section is less stereotyped than either the opening or closing. Finally, the third common component of a letter—the closing—conventionally included a farewell wish and could also include a health wish, a secondary greeting, and an autograph.²³

Thorsteinsson criticizes claims that Paul has uniquely expanded upon this threefold structure of Greco-Roman letters. For instance, William G. Doty insists that Paul developed a fivefold structure, adding a thanksgiving or blessing after the opening and a paraenetic section after the body.²⁴ Thorsteinsson, however, argues that Doty's suggestion falls apart when one observes that only three of Paul's letters—Romans, Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians—contain a section

20. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 17 (original emphases).

21. See John L. White, "New Testament Epistolary Literature in the Framework of Ancient Epistolography," *ANRW* 2.25.2 (1984): 1730–56.

22. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 19.

23. For more on epistolary closings, see Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *Neglected Endings: The Significance of the Pauline Letter Closings*, JSNTSup 101 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994).

24. William G. Doty, *Letters in Primitive Christianity*, GBS (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

after the body that might be classified as paraenetic. Further, neither Galatians nor 2 Corinthians contains material that one might call a thanksgiving section. Thorsteinsson concludes, "Unless well informed of a distinctive Pauline way of writing four- or five-part letters, no first century audience of his would have expected anything else from him but a regular three-part letter."²⁵

Thorsteinsson, therefore, analyzes the letter of Romans in light of the conventional tripartite nature of Greco-Roman letters. He argues that the opening, Rom 1:1-7, while containing conventional information, such as sender (v. 1) and recipients (v. 7), is so unique in its length that it would have caught the attention of its audience, who "would have paid special attention to the information provided in this initial section of the letter."²⁶ The length of the opening is due, in part, to the numerous epithets Paul uses to describe himself, a list considerably more expansive than in any of his other letter openings. These epithets, Thorsteinsson argues, would have established his authority with his readership, showing "that Paul himself was deeply concerned with pointing out his authoritative status for this particular audience."²⁷ Further, the material contained in Rom 1:2-6 extends the conventional opening and defines the gospel that Paul preaches—again, an element entirely lacking in the openings of Paul's other letters: "Apart from being a formal presentation of God's 'good news,' the extension functions as an additional specification not only of the sender but of the recipients as well, and as a thorough explanation of the relationship between these two parties."²⁸ The identification of the recipients, while formally appearing in Rom 1:7 ("all God's beloved in Rome"), already takes place in Rom 1:5-6 in a manner that connects Paul's authority as missionary to the gentiles to his composition of this letter to those gentiles who dwell in Rome.

Another aspect of Romans that is an epistolary convention is the use of beseeching language [*παρακαλέω*] in Rom 12:1-2: "Therefore, I

25. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 30.

26. *Ibid.*, 31.

27. *Ibid.*, 33. See also Robert Jewett, "Romans as an Ambassadorial Letter," *Int* 36 (1982): 5-20.

28. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 36-37.

beseech you, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies as living sacrifices, sacred and acceptable to God, which is your rationale worship. And do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of the mind so that you will approve what is God's will—that which is good, acceptable, and perfect.” Remarking on the centrality of this sort of request as the motivating factor in the composition of numerous ancient letters, Thorsteinsson concludes:

Due, first, to the central position and function of request formulas in ancient letters in general, many of which have requests as their sole or main occasion and purpose, second, to the central role played by the request formula in Romans 12:1–2, which not only has the preceding discourse in its entirety as its basis, but also functions properly as a summary of the subsequent one, and third, to the unmistakable change of form occurring at this point in the text, the hortatory request in 12:1–2 constitutes the structural center of Paul's letter.²⁹

Paul's expression of confidence that his readers in Rome would do as he asks (15:14) is connected to this request in Rom 12:1–2.

Finally, while scholars dispute whether Romans 16 was originally part of Paul's letter,³⁰ Thorsteinsson argues that such lengthy second-person greetings “in which the sender asks the recipient(s) to deliver greetings to someone for him or her” are quite common in Greco-Roman letters.³¹ In fact, this series of second-person greetings serves an important function in a letter that introduces Paul and his gospel to people who do not know him personally: “Paul's primary concern was to ensure the acceptance of the *εὐαγγέλιον* among his Roman audience by making evident the extent and nature of his relationship with a large group of people (including Phoebe), by whom the letter's message and Paul's status could be supported.”³²

29. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

30. See, for instance, James I. H. McDonald, “Was Romans 16 a Separate Letter?” *NTS* 16 (1970): 369–72; Harry Y. Gamble, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans: A Study in Textual and Literary Criticism*, SD 42 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977); and Norman R. Petersen, “On the Ending(s) to Paul's Letter to Rome,” in *The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, ed. Birger Pearson, A. Thomas Kraabel, and George W. E. Nickelsburg (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 337–47.

31. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 63. For more on second-person greetings, see Terence Y. Mullins, “Greeting as a New Testament Form,” *JBL* 87 (1968): 418–26.

32. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 65.

On the basis of the scattered evidence of epistolary formulae in Romans, Thorsteinsson concludes that Romans was a real letter, not a rhetorical speech set within an epistolary framework, one that fits with letters written in a normative setting. In other words, Romans was intended for a specific audience and dealt with a specific, contemporary issue.

This last point—that Romans was written within a normative setting—suggests to Thorsteinsson that Paul intended to address a specific issue or set of issues facing a specific audience. The question of Paul's audience is, for Thorsteinsson, of utmost importance, for it is crucial for the reading of the letter as a whole. Pauline scholars, however, continue to debate the ethnic composition of Paul's audience. Most argue—or take it for granted—that Paul's letter was written to a mixed group of “gentile Christians” and “Jewish Christians,” with the former in the majority. The scholarly discussion has largely revolved around reconstructions of the historical situation in Rome and the ethnic composition of Roman “Christianity” early in Nero's reign.³³ The problem, however, is that we know very little about the origins and development of the Jesus movement in Rome prior to Paul's letter. Thorsteinsson, therefore, distinguishes between two questions: the ethnic composition of Christ-believing movements in Rome, on one hand, and the ethnic composition of Paul's intended audience, on the other. The answer to this latter question should be sought in the letter itself, not outside of it.³⁴

Contrary to a few interpreters, who believe that Paul intended to address a primarily Jewish audience,³⁵ and to the majority of interpreters, who believe that Paul intended to address an audience

33. See, for example, Richard N. Longenecker, *Introducing Romans: Critical Issues in Paul's Most Famous Letter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 55–91.

34. See, too, Stowers, *Rereading of Romans*, 22. For thorough argumentation, see A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); idem, “The Gentile-Encoded Audience of Romans: The Church Outside the Synagogue,” in *Reading Paul's Letter to the Romans*, ed. Jerry L. Sumney, RBS 73 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 29–46.

35. F. C. Baur, *Paul the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Works, His Epistles and Teachings*, trans. E. Zeller and A. Menzies, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:321–81; and Steve Mason, “‘For I Am Not Ashamed of the Gospel’ (Rom 1:16): The Gospel and the First Readers of Romans,” in *Gospel in Paul: Studies on Corinthians, Galatians and Romans for Richard N. Longenecker*, ed. L. Ann Jervis and Peter Richardson, JSNTSup 108 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994), 254–87.

consisting of both Jews and gentiles,³⁶ Thorsteinsson, together with an increasing number of scholars, argues that it is unnecessary to presume that Jews (or “Jewish Christians”) are among Paul’s *intended* audience.³⁷ To begin with, the letter is formally addressed to people of gentile origin, and on several occasions Paul explicitly refers to his audience as gentiles, and only as gentiles (1:5–7, 13–15; 11:13; 15:15–16). Second, even implicit references to the audience (for example, 4:1; 7:1; 15:7) neither exclude the gentile audience nor entail a Jewish one. The fact that Paul seems to presume the audience’s knowledge of Jewish law and customs does not require a Jewish component among the audience Paul intends to address. It simply means that Paul’s gentile audience associated to some degree with Jewish communities in Rome. In short, regardless of the actual ethnic makeup of Jesus believers living in Rome in the first century CE, Romans was written to people of gentile origin. These are not just any gentiles, but gentiles who are relatively familiar with—and attracted to—Jewish customs.

Thorsteinsson also addresses weaknesses in the majority reconstruction of Paul’s intended audience, explicitly discussing a number of pieces of evidence that commentators believe prove that the intended audience was ethnically mixed. First, numerous interpreters understand Paul’s language of the “weak” and the “strong” in Romans 14–15 to refer to law-observant Jewish believers and law-free gentile believers (and Jewish believers, such as Paul, who stopped observing the Jewish law), respectively.³⁸ Yet, nothing in the text requires this identification. Non-Jews in the Greco-Roman world also dealt with issues of vegetarianism and observing holy days. For that matter, it is possible, as A. Andrew Das has argued, to conclude that the weak are, in fact, gentiles who are judaizing, while the strong are gentiles who refuse to judaize.³⁹

36. Basically, all modern commentators.

37. Here, he follows Johannes Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, trans. Frank Clarke (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), 196–209. See also, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 185–86; and Stowers, *Rereading of Romans*, 21–33.

38. See the overview of Mark Reasoner, *The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1–15.13 in Context*, SNTSMS 130 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1–22. On the problems inherent in referring to both Paul and Pauline believers in Christ as “law-free,” see Paula Fredriksen, “Judaizing the Nations: The Ritual Demands of Paul’s Gospel,” *NTS* 56 (2010): 232–52.

Second, some scholars point to the greetings in Romans 16 as evidence that Paul believed that some Jewish believers in Jesus would be in the audience. For instance, E. P. Sanders points to the Jewish names in Romans 16, and concludes, "Romans is unique in the Pauline correspondence in containing so many clues to the presence of Jewish Christians among the readership."⁴⁰ Similarly, Richard B. Hays believes that Romans 16 contains "some of the strongest evidence for the mixed Jewish-gentile composition of the Christian community at Rome."⁴¹ But, as Thorsteinsson points out, these remarks confuse first-person greetings with second-person greetings. Only the former greeting speaks to the identity of the intended audience. Consequently, while Paul mentions a number of Jewish believers in Jesus here, the fact that he asks his intended readers to greet them suggests that he believes (rightly or wrongly) that they would not be among the initial audience when the letter was read corporately.

Finally—and this point is significant—Thorsteinsson stresses that his argument pertains only to Paul's intentions. Whom did Paul *intend* to address when he wrote and sent his letter to Rome? Again, this issue of intention differs from the question of the actual, empirical makeup of the community of believers in Jesus in Rome.⁴² While modern scholars cannot know with any certainty the ethnic makeup of those first *empirical* readers of Paul's letter to Rome, numerous references within the letter help identify Paul's *intended* audience as gentiles, as we have already mentioned. First, Paul asserts at the very beginning of his letter that his mission is to bring about the obedience of faith among the gentiles, among whom you [the intended readers] belong (Rom 1:5–7).⁴³ Further, Paul identifies his intended readers as gentiles (1:13–15) in his claim that he wants to come to you [the intended readers] in order to

39. Das, *Solving the Romans Debate*, 109.

40. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 184.

41. Richard B. Hays, "The Gospel Is the Power of God for Salvation to Gentiles Only? A Critique of Stanley Stowers's *Rereading of Romans*," *CRBR* 9 (1996): 27–44 (37).

42. On the question of the ethnic makeup of believers in Jesus in Rome in the first century CE, see Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 69–79.

43. See Krister Stendahl, *Final Account: Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 13.

reap a harvest among you [the intended readers] just as he has and wants to do among the *rest of the gentiles*—people, whether Greek or barbarian, wise or foolish, to whom Paul believes himself obligated.⁴⁴ In the body of his letter, Paul discusses the failure of ethnic Israel (whom he describes as his brothers, according to the flesh [Rom 9:3]) to believe in Jesus Christ (Romans 9–11). His explanation for this stunning turn of events is that God has temporarily hardened them so that the gospel might go to the gentiles. This claim leads Paul to warn his readers against arrogance—if God can harden Paul’s fellow Jews, surely gentiles should be careful! In the midst of this discussion, Paul directly addresses his readers: “But to you gentiles, I say . . .” (11:13), noting again that he is the apostle to the gentiles. Consequently, Romans 9–11 provides further evidence that Paul’s intended addressees are identified as gentiles. While some have suggested that Rom 11:13 indicates that Paul has turned from addressing Jewish readers to addressing gentile readers,⁴⁵ nothing preceding Rom 11:13 directly addresses Jews. Rather, Paul’s discussion repeatedly refers to Jews in the third person.⁴⁶ In fact, as Johannes Munck noted some years ago, in Rom 11:1, Paul does not point to Jewish people in his audience as evidence that God has not abandoned ethnic Israel; rather, he needs to point to himself as proof of this assertion. This again suggests that Paul’s intended audience is exclusively gentile.⁴⁷ Finally, Paul acknowledges in Rom 15:15–16 that he has written quite boldly to his readers in Rome, but defends this boldness by pointing yet again to his apostolic commission to the gentiles. Paul can write with such confidence to people he does not know personally and to a community that he did not establish because he believes that he is writing to a group of gentile believers—people over whom he has been given authority.

44. See Runar M. Thorsteinsson, “Paul’s Missionary Duty towards Gentiles in Rome: A Note on the Punctuation and Syntax of Rom 1.13-15,” *NTS* 48 (2002): 531–47.

45. See Francis Watson, “The Law in Romans,” in *Reading Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Jerry L. Sumney, RBS 73 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 93–108 (105).

46. See Mark D. Nanos, “To the Churches within the Synagogues of Rome,” in *Reading Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Jerry L. Sumney, RBS 73 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2012), 11–28 (23).

47. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*, 28n3.

But if Paul intends to address a gentile audience, how can we explain the fact that Romans is replete with Jewish themes? For instance, the letter contains unexplained references to Jesus's messiahship and descent from David (1:3–4; 15:12), discussions of the patriarch Abraham (Romans 4), numerous references to the Jewish law, and a discussion of Israel's unbelief (Romans 9–11). Paul appears to believe that his intended audience is both interested in and knowledgeable of the Jewish law—perhaps even wondering how much or in what way it applies to them now (Rom 7:1). This, however, is not to say that Paul intended his letter for an audience that included both ethnic Jews and non-Jews.

This identification of Paul's intended audience, using the explicit evidence of the letter to the Romans rather than being misled by the question of the ethnic makeup of followers of Christ living in Rome, has considerable implications for the question of Paul's interlocutor in the letter (Romans 2–11), which Thorsteinsson takes up in chapter 3. Thorsteinsson focuses on Paul's use of a dialogical style in Romans. The style is introduced with a direct address in the second-person singular in Romans 2 and is followed in Romans 3 onward with a series of questions and answers. This style characterizes large parts of the text until Romans 12, at which point the series of questions and answers disappears. This evidence of a dialogical style in the letter requires careful positioning within Greco-Roman thinking on dialogues, particularly those dialogues that occur within letters.⁴⁸

Central to properly understanding any dialogue or diatribe is accurately identifying the interlocutor with whom a speaker or writer engages. Yet, it is precisely here that the diatribe presents inherent difficulties, for usually built into the style is what Stowers refers to as “a calculated duality or ambiguity” with regard to the identity of the interlocutor.⁴⁹ Consequently, for a diatribe to work well, Thorsteinsson

48. Thorsteinsson follows, but develops, the work of Rudolf Bultmann, *Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe*, FRLANT 13 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910); Stanley K. Stowers, *The Diatribe and Paul's Letter to the Romans*, SBLDS 57 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); Thomas Schmeller, *Paulus und die "Diatribe": Eine Vergleichende Stilinterpretation*, NTAbh 19 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1987); and Elliott, *Rhetoric*.

49. Stowers, *Diatribe*, 110.

argues, a speaker or writer must embed at least some commonalities between the interlocutor and the intended audience.⁵⁰

When it comes to the more specific question of trying to identify a fictitious interlocutor in a letter such as Romans, it is more helpful to turn to analogous features in literature of the same genre—namely, letters. Contrary to Stowers, Thorsteinsson believes that one must distinguish diatribes within a classroom, on the one hand, and fictitious dialogues in speech or letters, on the other. The only extant letters containing diatribes come from Seneca and Plutarch; therefore, Thorsteinsson argues that these letters are the most relevant for identifying Paul's interlocutor.

In his investigation of interlocutors in ancient letters, Thorsteinsson observes a general principle by which one can identify the interlocutor in question: Unless otherwise indicated, the epistolary interlocutor represents or speaks for the letter's recipient(s). Put differently, the audience was expected to identify themselves with the fictitious interlocutor. This should in no way come as a surprise, if we consider the ancient idea of epistolary communication as a written dialogue with absent persons as if they were present. Another principle follows from the first: interlocutors tend to be the same throughout a given text, unless otherwise indicated.

Letters frequently contained rhetorical questions and exchanges of questions and answers. That letters would contain dialogues is to be expected, given the oft-voiced sentiment that letters were surrogates for face-to-face conversations and dialogues (for example, Demetrius, *Eloc.* 223; Cicero, *Epistle* 3.8–9; Seneca, *Moral Epistle* 75.1; Julius Victor, *Rhet.* 27; Gregory of Nazianzus, *Epistle* 51.4; Pseudo-Libanius, *Ep. Char.* 2). But a letter writer could also move from including dialogical elements within a letter to a more developed dialogue containing an epistolary interlocutor. Thorsteinsson details examples of such epistolary interlocutors in the letters of Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch, Pliny, Quintilian, and Suetonius, concluding that their words are often presented implicitly “not by a verb of saying,” but through an

50. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor*, 128.

“interrogative phrase such as τί οὖν, *quid ergo*, etc.” or “adversative or inferential conjunctions.”⁵¹

The function of the epistolary interlocutor, among other things, is to enable the writer “to respond in advance to potential objections to what is being uttered in the letter.”⁵² The interlocutor’s “interruptions” give voice to the potential thoughts of the intended audience. The audience must, consequently, identify itself in some way with the epistolary interlocutor: “Unlike many of the ‘diatribe’ texts, however, a general, verifiable, norm may be discerned in this respect. As a rule, the epistolary interlocutor represents and/or speaks for the letter’s recipient(s).”⁵³ While he believes that this rule applies to Romans, Thorsteinsson acknowledges that these examples differ slightly from Romans in that they always address a single reader, unlike Romans, which addresses a community.⁵⁴

Examining Paul’s letter to the Romans, Thorsteinsson begins by noting that Paul initiates a dialogue in Rom 2:1, directly addressing someone in the second-person singular: Διὸ ἀναπολόγητος εἶ, ὃ ἄνθρωπε πᾶς ὁ κρίνων. This second-person address continues throughout Romans 2 and into chapters 3–11, chapters that contain scattered questions and answers. At Rom 12:1–2, Paul moves from such questions and answers to imperatival language—using beseeching language to address his intended readers more directly. He cites further evidence of dialogical language: the second-person singular (9:19; 11:19) and first-person singular (10:18–19; 11:1, 11) verbs of saying;⁵⁵ the numerous occurrences of the interrogative phrase τί οὖν (3:1, 9; 4:1; 6:1, 15; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 19, 30; 11:7); the adversative conjunction ἀλλά (for example, 3:7, 27; 9:32), as well as strong negations to posed questions, especially μὴ γένοιτο (3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11).⁵⁶ This evidence suggests to Thorsteinsson that Paul engages in a dialogue

51. *Ibid.*, 137–38.

52. *Ibid.*, 140.

53. *Ibid.*, 141.

54. *Ibid.*, 143.

55. More complicated are the first-person plural verbs of saying found in Rom 3:5; 4:1; 6:1; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 30.

56. For an impressive graphic display, see Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 146.

with a fictional interlocutor throughout Romans 2–11.⁵⁷ Moreover, formal factors in the dialogue of Romans suggest that the interlocutor is the same throughout Romans 3–11, even though this can, at times, be very difficult to determine, especially when Paul uses the first-person plural, “we,” in such a dialogue. This means that the identity of Paul’s interlocutor is established already in Romans 2, where the apostle addresses the interlocutor directly in the second-person singular before moving to the dialogue proper.

To summarize: the letter to the Romans is addressed to people in Rome who are of gentile origin and are, therefore, subject to Paul’s apostolic authority as “an apostle to the gentiles” (Rom 11:13). The letter itself proclaims and explains God’s “good news” to this group of people. Large parts of the letter are characterized by a dialogical style, suitable for such a pedagogical purpose. When the dialogical style of the diatribe was used in ancient letters, the letter’s interlocutor was normally formed as a fictitious representative for the letter’s audience. This fictitious representation, in fact, turns out to be one of the central features of our generic classification of Romans as an epistolary diatribe: Paul, as author, expects his audience to identify with this fictitious partner in dialogue. With these general aspects in mind, we can return to Romans 2.

In the fourth and final chapter, Thorsteinsson brings together his work on Greco-Roman epistolary theory, epistolary interlocutors, and the identification of Paul’s intended audience to articulate a general theory for reading Romans: whoever this interlocutor is, he should, according to Greco-Roman conventions, represent—in some way—Paul’s intended audience. “In principle, Paul’s interlocutor(s) in Romans is representative of the letter’s gentile audience and the one(s) with whom the audience should identify.”⁵⁸

Before he tests this theory against the content of Romans 2, which employs dialogical language and features, Thorsteinsson begins in Rom 1:18–32. As noted above, he urges a *linear* reading of

57. In this, Thorsteinsson disagrees with Stowers (*Rereading of Romans*, 249), who believes that the dialogue ends by Romans 5.

58. Thorsteinsson, *Paul’s Interlocutor*, 152.