

2009

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Recommended Citation

Young, N. H. (2009). An analysis of Romans 14:5-6 via the New Perspective on Paul. *International Journal of New Perspectives in Christianity*, 1(1), 57-66. Retrieved from <https://research.avondale.edu.au/npc/vol1/iss1/8>

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An Analysis of Romans 14:5-6 via the New Perspective on Paul

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The Apostle Paul has often been held responsible for transforming the teachings of Jesus the Jew into an anti-Semitic religion of hate. The recent emphasis on Paul's essential Jewishness and his positive attitude to the Law has given a more historically nuanced picture of the Apostle. This "new perspective" on Paul is somewhat affirmed in this paper's examination of Romans 14:5-6. Contrary to the opinion of numerous New Testament scholars, a careful analysis of Romans 14:5-6 reveals that Paul is not opposing the Jewish Sabbath. Indeed, it argues that the passage is about a group of festive days, and is not dealing with just a single day (the Sabbath) in contrast with no holy day at all. Furthermore, the dispute over foods is to be related to the festive days discussed in vv. 5-6. However, Paul's main concern is not when the Roman churches gather for fellowship meals, nor indeed the nature of the viands. His prime, perhaps his only, desire is that these fellowship meals be inclusive of Jew and gentile alike in the unity of Christ.

Introduction

The insanity of the Holocaust still challenges belief—not that it happened, but that it could happen. Anyone who has visited the Holocaust museums in Jerusalem, Stockholm, New York, London (in the Imperial War Museum), or even Sydney, is staggered by the brutality and the stupidity of the Nazi systematic genocide. I've been to Dachau but not Auschwitz: to visit such places is to leave one ashamed and bewildered. Anti-semitism is still present even in Australia. For example, some of the Melbourne demonstrators against the Israeli bombing of Gaza carried placards with such slogans as "Clean the Earth from the Dirty Zionists," "Chosen Dirty People of the Earth," "Stop the Sub-human Zionist Land-grabbing, Mass Murders in Occupied Palestine." One Australian told a BBC interviewer in Beirut, "I'm here to kill Jews" (Sheehan, 2009). Whatever the excesses of Israel's response to the relentless rocket attacks against her, nothing excuses this kind of rhetoric of hate.

One is appalled emotionally and logically at the holocaust. Logically, it is so insane. A Jewish joke emphasises how illogical anti-Semitism is. Some Nazi ruffians roughly accosted an old Jew and abused his race as the cause of all the ills in Germany. "Yes," agreed the old Jew, "and the cyclists." "Why the cyclists?" the puzzled Nazis asked. "Why the Jews?" the old man responded. Many post-holocaust Jews have asked the same question, "Why us?"

Jewish scholarship's first answer to this question was that the holocaust could not have occurred without the long history of Christian anti-Semitism (e.g., Bartrop, 1994; Cohn-Sherbok, 1992). First, they pointed to the support of Nazi policy found in German Christian scholarly writings, including theologians and New Testament specialists (Weinreich, 1946). They pushed it back further to Luther's polemical rhetoric against the Jews and his facile dismissal of Judaism as legalistic in contrast with the grace of Christianity. The Middle Ages proved to be no less anti-Semitic than later Christianity. The passion plays are a visual means of maintaining the Christian hatred of Jews, especially their misuse of Matthew 27:25: "Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'" The cry of an enraged "lynch mob" hardly speaks for a nation.

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Scholarship pushed research back into the writings of the early church fathers, and the evidence of an anti-Jewish rhetoric was again a constant theme in writers such as Ignatius, Barnabas, Origen, Tertullian, Cyprian and Chrysostom (de Lange, 1976; Wilken, 1983). The final bastion of the Christian claim of being bearers of love and tolerance to the world, the New Testament itself, seems to many also to have within it the language of anti-Semitism, especially in the passion narratives, John's excoriation of the Jews, and Paul's abandonment of the Law (Beutler, 2006; Das, 2003; Dunn, 2001; Motyer, 1997, 2002; Richardson, 1986; Sandmel, 1978). When all the emotion and extreme assessments are discounted, what remains in the history of Christian anti-Semitism presents a very sorry picture indeed.

It is painful for any follower of Christ to discover the long history of Christian persecution of the Jews, but it is intolerable to think that the very foundation documents of Christianity are themselves anti-Semitic. Gaston (1987) observed: "A Christian church with an anti-Semitic New Testament is abominable, but a Christian church without a New Testament is inconceivable" (p. 15. See also Kee & Borowsky, 1998). This has led to a reappraisal of some long-held scholarly opinions. First, there has been a renewed Christian appreciation of Judaism as a religion of grace (Sanders, 1977). Second, Christian scholarship has gained a better understanding of the kinship between the two faiths. Third, and not least for our purposes, there is an increased acceptance, not only of Jesus' Jewishness, but also of Paul's Jewishness (Charlesworth, 1991; Witherington, 1997, 1998; Young, 1997). Indeed, the process of re-assessment of Paul has given rise to what has been called "the new perspective on Paul."

The new perspective emphasises three things in contrast to the traditional Protestant view (Dunn, 2008). First, Judaism is not essentially legalistic. Second, "works of the Law" in Paul refers to the marks that distinguished the Jews from the gentiles, and not to meritorious works performed to gain salvation (Watson, 2007). Third, Paul's major concern was the incorporation of gentiles into the covenant people of God through the death of Christ, rather than the justifying of individual sinners (see Westerholm, 2004, for a critique and defence of the traditional view). One of the problems confronting the new perspective is just why Paul conflicted with his fellow Jews. If their obedience was in the form of "covenantal nomism," that is, a response to grace, how does that differ from Paul's own view? Or to put it another way, why is Paul both positive and negative towards the Law, if Judaism was not a legalistic religion? For our paper, we are concerned to discover whether the new perspective's more positive view of Paul and the Law guides us to a better appreciation of a text such as Romans 14:5-6. I now analyse this text in more detail.

The Altercation over Days

Hos men [gar] krinei hēmeran par' hēmeran, hos de krinei pasan hēmeran; hekastos en tō idiō noi plērophoreisthō. Ho phronōn tēn hēmeran kuriō phronei; kai ho esthiōn kuriō esthieī, eucharistei gar tō theō; kai ho mē esthiōn kuriō ouk esthieī kai eucharistei tō theō.

Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God (Romans 14:5-6 NRA).

Several traditional interpretations are commonly proffered concerning the altercation over days in Romans 14:5-6, including the following:

1. The most common view is that Paul in this passage is confronting a situation where some are observing the Sabbath while others respect no day (Moo, 1996). Those observing the day are said to be the "weak," and those not observing are identified as the "strong" (Barclay, 2001; Dunn, 1988; Jewett, 2007).

2. de Lacy (1982) takes the unusual view that it is the strong, such as Paul, who observe the Jewish holy days, while “the consciences of the weak might well have forbidden them from enjoying the festivals” (p. 182).
3. Another variation is the suggestion that the weak are observing the Sabbath, while the strong are treating every day as the Sabbath, that is, Sabbath indicates a daily lifestyle. The text is then read as saying, “one person observes the Sabbath as more important than any other day, but another person observes every day as a Sabbath” (Bruce, 1963, p. 245; Weiss, 1985).
4. The suggestion that the issue is over one group (the weak) observing Sabbath, and another (the strong) observing Sunday, has little to commend it. Paul’s apostolic ministry is historically too early for such a debate, and nothing in the text indicates the dispute is over the shift to Sunday as the preferred Christian day of worship (Black, 1973; Michel, 1966; Winter, 2002).
5. The idea that the differences revolve around lucky days or fast days does not do justice to the obvious Jewish nature of the dispute, nor the fact that the issue was over eating and not about abstaining from food (Cranfield, 1979; Dederen, 1982; Käsemann, 1980).

The verb *krinō* is used in verse 5 with the meaning “to distinguish,” “to adjudge,” “to prefer,” “to separate,” “to decide” (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, & Danker, 1957; Liddell & Scott, 1940). The preposition *para* with the accusative *hēmeran* is comparative, that is, one day more than, or rather than, another day (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, & Danker, 1957). The coupling of *hos men* with *hos de* emphasises a contrast, that is, “one adjudges this ... but another adjudges that.” If someone adjudges one day as more important than another, it implies that more than one day is esteemed to some degree. Wright (2008) adjudges Easter as more important than Christmas, but that does not mean that he despises and ignores Christmas. Approving every holy day, of course, also requires more than one day. From these initial observations, I now draw a series of conclusions.

The Social Context

My first contention is that the historical context of the discussion concerning days relates to the congregations’ worship. The reference, then, is not to private practice, but to corporate conduct. Hence, Paul’s concern is for peace and for mutual upbuilding (v. 19). Second, I maintain that whatever *krinō* means in the first clause in verse 5, it must also mean in the second clause. The syntax and thought of the language is too closely parallel for the meaning to change. Hence, if the first clause refers to some action, such as observing a day as holy, then the second clause must have the same idea. This would then make it difficult to see the text as referring to one observing the seventh-day Sabbath, while another observes every day as the Sabbath, for the one who esteems every day as a Sabbath would not actually be observing any day as such (Weiss, 2008). This latter view would be more relevant to a twenty-first century secular society than to a first-century religious milieu.

Third, and accordingly, the second clause refers to a positive action regarding every day, just as the first clause refers to a positive attitude concerning selected days. Jewett’s understanding of the situation reverses what the text actually says. In Jewett’s (1982) opinion, “some members of the Roman community of Christians are committed to a liturgical calendar, ... while others feel free from the obligation to observe holy days (p. 131). However, the text reads positively, *hos de krinei pasan hēmeran* (another esteems every day), which unequivocally states that a person esteems or values every day. That is not being free of the celebration of holy days, but being committed to every holy day as opposed to valuing one holy day above another. Jewett’s view would require Paul to have written *hos men krinei mian hēmeran para*

pasas hēmeras, hos de ou krinei hēmeran (one esteems one day more than all other days, another esteems no day), but he says no such thing.

Fourth, and contrary to the majority view, the strong is the one who *krinei hēmeran par' hēmeran* (esteems one day more than another day), and the weak is the one who *krinei pasan hēmeran* (esteems every day). Paul elsewhere consistently has the order strong then weak (14:2, 3, 6b, 22-23; 15:1) (an insight from Dr Ross Cole in an unpublished paper). The language implies a group of holy days, hence *pasan hēmeran* should not be read as though it meant “every day in the week,” but rather as “every day in a set of holy times.” Those who wished to retain Judaism’s festive tradition in its entirety would affirm all the holy times, while the strong were prepared to celebrate some of the festivals as more relevant than others. In the Christian tradition, this would be Passover and Pentecost, but not Purim.

Consequently, fifth, both groups are celebrating days, even if one values some holy days while another values them all. And this is exactly what Paul says: *ho phronōn tēn hēmeran kuriō phronei* (he who considers the day, considers it to the Lord, v. 6a). Unlike the issue over meals—where both the one eating and the one not eating do it to the Lord (v. 6b)—Paul does not say, “he who does not consider the day, does not consider it to the Lord” (Ancient scribes were bemused at the lack of balance and added *ho mē phronōn tēn hēmeran kuriō ou phronei* [he who does not consider the day, does not consider it to the Lord]). He has only the positive statement, “he who considers the day, considers it to the Lord.” This is because both groups are still observing days, whether it is one day as more important than another or every day as equally important. Moo (1996, p. 843) gives no reason to support his view that Paul is addressing only the weak in verse 6a. Paul does not say, “he who does not observe the day, does not observe it to the Lord,” for the simple reason that that was not what was happening in the Roman churches.

Sixth, we may safely dismiss the idea that the issue was caused by a debate over Sunday and Sabbath. It appears that both sides were observing Passover and Pentecost as fellowship meals, even though one group wanted more than this. Hence, it is also misleading to limit the debate to the observance or non-observance of the Sabbath. Indeed, Paul’s emphasis is on festival days rather than on the Sabbath as such. Lucky and unlucky days can be dismissed as very unlikely, given the clear Jewish-Torah nature of the debate in Rom 14-15 (Käsemann, 1980, p. 370). The suggestion that the issue was over fast days likewise has little to commend it. The language clearly implies the issue was over a group of days, and within a Jewish context these would be Judaism’s various festivals, which within synagogue worship invariably involved fellowship meals. Thus, the discussion about eating and drinking should not be dissociated from the issue over the celebration of festive days, and that of course rules out fast days.

Christianity moved quickly away from the temple rituals (Dunn, 1991, p. 95). However, through the synagogue, the temple worship profoundly influenced the church’s early liturgical development. We should note that the synagogue had already largely shorn from the temple’s festival days many of their ritual aspects. Christianity continued this “de-templation” process. Of course, we do not know much about the worship life of the first-century synagogues, but it seems clear that the festivals were observed in some manner (Sanders, 1992, pp. 133-134; Schürer, 1986, pp. 144-145; Stern, 2002, p. 107; Tcherikover, 1959, p. 355; Thornton, 1989, pp. 97-100). This is true also of the early Christians. Dunn (1988) appeals to 1 Corinthians 16:8; Acts 20:6, 16; 27:9 as indicating “the continuing importance of the Jewish festivals at this [early] period of Christian development” (p. 806). Inevitably, Christians initially reflected the synagogue tradition of worshipping on set holy days, as noted by van der Horst (1999): “The oldest Christian communities conducted weekly religious services. It seems to me an inevitable conclusion that they adopted this practice, too, from

their Jewish contemporaries,.... So it seems almost certain that the weekly worship in earliest Christianity was a legacy of Judaism” (p. 33).

Burtchaell (1992) has argued that, “when the record is silent or all but mute on any aspect of how the Christians arranged their affairs and provided themselves with church officers, it is safe as an initial assumption to suppose that the traditional patterns may have been carrying on” (p. 199). Burtchaell also says: “Every enterprise, even if it is most creative, prolongs many of the older ways unchallenged, and therefore often unnoticed. Because these continuities are uncontroversial the record tends to be silent about them” (p. 194). The early Christians may not have been as averse to celebrating the Jewish holy festivals in their own way as is sometimes supposed.

The Viands at Communal Meals

The frequent reference to the impact of one member’s action upon another clearly shows that the dispute over food is occurring within the context of fellowship meals (see Rom. 14:3, 10; 15:1-2). This reinforces our contention that the issue of the festival days cannot be isolated from the dispute over food. Some are so conscientious about unclean foods that, to avoid any possible contamination, they limit their diet to vegetables, while others will eat everything (*panta*, 14:2). Clearly, “everything” includes meat. Whether it means all meats without distinction is not necessarily demanded by the *panta* (for a conservative assessment, see Tomson, 1999, 2001). Paul urges that the Christian fellowship meals allow freedom, where those who restrict their food to vegetables are not belittled, and those who eat everything are not condemned (vv. 3-4). The issue in Paul’s view is simply a “dispute over opinions” (v. 1 *mē eis diakriseis dialogismōn*). When he further addresses these initial verses, it is not the matter of days (vv. 5-6) that he expands, but the issue over foods. Thus, Paul’s concern had more to do with the tension over the food at the meals than the time of the occasion.

For his key premise he can appeal to a dominical ruling, namely, that nothing is unclean of itself (vv. 14, 20). The terms *koinos* (common) and *katharos* (clean) inform us that the contention is Jewish in origin. The sanctity of foods is a matter of cultural conditioning, and is not inherent in the viands themselves (*tō logizomenō ti koinon einai, ekeinō koinon*, [to him who reckons something to be common, to him it is common] v. 14b). The problem is in the person’s thinking or faith in that (s)he is still fettered to primitive taboos about food (v. 23). However, having said that, in Paul’s view both those who limit their diet at the church’s social gatherings and those who have no such restrictions, are doing so out of a good and acceptable conscience to the Lord (v. 6b). The issue has to do with *kashrut* and not food that had been sacrificed to idols (Gooch, 1993, pp. 117-118).

It is evident that synagogue worship involved fellowship meals. There is evidence from Jericho, Ostia, and Stobi, of synagogues designed with a *triclinium* as part of their architecture (Clausen, 2001, pp. 155, 158; Richardson, 2003, pp. 95, 99; Smith, 2004, p. 33). Josephus also provides testimony that the synagogue provided the venue for fellowship meals (AJ 14.215, 259-61). Josephus speaks of their coming together on stated days (261), and of having their own place for gathering together (235, 258, 261). Smith (2003) notes that, “separate sects within Judaism tended to celebrate their separateness and cohesiveness by holding special meals together” (pp. 133, 150). Christians likewise practised their worship at the table, and coming together meant assembling to eat together (Banks, 1985; Smith, 2003, pp. 178-179). The issues at Antioch, Rome, and Corinth, to which we may add Caesarea and Colossae, are “related to Jewish dietary laws” (Smith, 2003, p. 180). Early Christians were to some degree celebrating their fellowship meals on festival days inherited from Judaism, but they debated which days and what food. Was this the only cause of the disruption? Paul was determined to defuse the issue over eating and drinking at the Christian fellowship meals. This would seem to indicate that there was more at stake than simply the matter of days and food.

Paul's Pastoral Concern for Unity

The author's primary objective in Roman 14-15 is to preserve the harmonious unity of the Roman congregations. The material cause of the division was a difference of opinion over the choice of viands, but the real cause was the participation of uncircumcised gentiles in the fellowship (Nanos, 2002, pp. 300-304). Paul's focus was on the division the food served at their fellowship meals was causing (Barclay, 2001, pp. 293-295). The reference to the divine welcome in verse 3 (*ho theos gar auton proslabeto*), and Christ's welcome in verse 15:7b (*kathōs kai ho Christos proslabeto humas*), is the basis of the imperatives to welcome one another in verses 14.1 and 15.7a (*Ton de asthenounta tē pistei proslambanesthe; Dio proslambanesthe allēlous*). That *proslambanō* sometimes refers to partaking of food (Acts 27:33, 36) is relevant to the context of Rom 14-15, where Paul is wanting to head off the threat to the unity of the church - especially in its fellowship meals - posed by scruples over diet. Paul's concern about taboos regarding food and its disruptive potential is readily discerned in the texts. Barclay (2001) notes:

Paul is discussing here not the general practices of the Christians concerned but their specific behaviour when they meet and eat together. The disputes arise when they do (or do not) welcome one another to meals (Rom 14:1-3), and their debates are given urgency not as general discussions of lifestyle but as specific arguments about the food set before them on such occasions. (p. 291)

The controlling factor for gaining unity in the fellowship meals is the love of Christ revealed in his death for others (vv. 8-9, 15; 15:3-7). The kingdom of God and its righteousness is much larger than the matter of eating or drinking (v. 17). Those who feel free to eat everything are to use their liberty judiciously so as to retain the unity of fellowship with those who are unable to exercise the same freedom. They are to restrict their diet for the sake of those who do not feel free to eat everything (vv. 20-22).

The frequent references to Jews and gentiles in Romans telegraph to us Paul's concern in the letter. "Uncircumcised" occurs 11 times in Romans (25 times in the New Testament) and "circumcised" is found 15 times (41 times in the New Testament). There are 11 incidents of "Jews" in Romans (201 times in the New Testament, mostly in Acts) and 29 of "gentiles" (167 times in the New Testament). Paul's admonitions in chapter 15 address this diversity. They are not to please themselves (v. 1), but to live in harmony with one another (v. 5) and to glorify God with one voice (v. 6), for the gentiles too are to glorify God (v. 9). Paul quotes four biblical texts, all containing the plural *ethnē* (gentiles), to prove that the inclusion of the gentiles into the worshipping Christian community was always God's intention. Moiser (1990) says that "only Jews needed convincing of that," but that is surely not true (p. 580). Gentile Christians needed assurance that, equally with the Jews, they were heirs of the covenant. God is praised among the gentiles (vv. 9b, 11), they rejoice with his people (v. 10), and their hope is centred in Christ (v. 12). Both groups, Jew and gentile Christians, are therefore to welcome one another (v. 7).

Paul's concern was that whenever the Christians gathered for a fellowship meal, they did so with mutual acceptance. The frequent use of the reciprocal pronoun *allelōn* in chapters 12-16 emphasises Paul's concern for unity. The pronoun *allelōn* occurs 100 times in the New Testament. Romans has 14 of these, which is second in frequency to the Fourth Gospel with 15 occurrences. Eleven of the examples in Romans occur in chapters 12-16, and three in chapters 1-2. They are members of one another in the one body in Christ (12:5), they are to love one another with sibling love (12:10; 13:8), they are to have mutual respect for one another (*to auto eis allēlous phronountes*, 12:16; cf. 15:5), they are no longer to judge one another (14:13), they are to affirm one another (14:19), welcome one another (15:7), and instruct one another (15:14).

The admonitions in Rom 15:1-13 seem to be directed at the several house churches in Rome to cultivate an integrated worship. In Lampe's (1991) well-researched opinion, because of "the lack of a central worship place in Rome throughout the centuries, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that these (at least) eight circles also worshipped separately—in separate dwellings somewhere in the different quarters of the city" (pp. 229-230). The Old Testament quotations are all directed towards mutual acceptance within the congregations of Jewish and gentile believers. Paul's desire was for a united worship of the diverse social groups. No doubt these separate house churches gathered for communal meals. Moiser (1990) notes: "The church [in Rome] consisted of about eight autonomous cells which kept in touch by exchanging the eucharist" (p. 577). According to Watson (1991): "Thus, Rom. 16 confirms the hypothesis about the purpose of Romans derived from 14:1-15:13. The purpose of Romans is to encourage Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome, divided over the question of the law, to set aside their differences and to worship together" (p. 211). It is likely that there were in fact several congregations in Rome (Clark, 2002; Lampe, 1991). Or, as Moiser (1990) states it: Paul's "aim is to reconcile Jew and gentile in the Roman churches and thereby provide himself with a starting-point for his further mission" (p. 575).

Conclusion

Has the new perspective on Paul assisted us in understanding any better the debate reflected in Romans 14.5-6? The answer is both no and yes. Since the new perspective sees Sabbath as one of the markers of Judaism that Paul categorises as *adiaphora*, the answer is no. The tendency to see the issue as a matter of keeping Sabbath or abandoning it (at least for the gentiles) is unchanged (e.g., see Dunn, 1988, p. 805; Meeks, 1987, p. 292; Sampley, 1995, p. 42; Toney, 2008, pp. 61-67). Nevertheless, the new perspective has given us a deeper appreciation of Paul's concern for a united worship of Jewish and gentile believers. This brings us to our own conclusion. Paul's concern was not about *kosher* food or Jewish festivals as such. His concern was that the Christian fellowship meals be conducted in an inclusive manner. Paul would have had no objection to a Sabbath communal gathering, provided the viands on the table allowed everyone to feel welcome. Nor is it likely that he would have been offended at a Christian gathering over Passover or on some other Jewish festive day. Nor is there any reason to doubt that the practices of the synagogue provided the Pauline churches with a tradition of communal meals on set days that they readily embraced. Why would former Jews and gentile God-fearers think to do otherwise?

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