Three Types of Identity Formation for Paul as Servant of Christ Jesus in Romans
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William S. Campbell challenged us, and continues to challenge us, to pay close attention to the construction of Christian identity as represented in Paul’s letters. This is a timely question that he developed throughout his scholarly career, since his Edinburgh Ph.D. thesis in 1972, as he grappled with the complex issues raised by Romans 9-11, then in his book, Paul’s Gospel in Inter-Cultural Context: Jews and Gentiles in the Letter to the Romans (1991 and 1992), and most directly in his Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity (2006) and numerous articles, including ‘Ernst Käsemann on Romans: The Way Forward or the End of an Era?’ In the process he cogently contributed to the development of the ‘New Perspective’ on Paul that compellingly opened our eyes to the possibility of reading Paul’s letters, and the letter to the Romans in particular, in a radically different way.

A brief review of the development of the scholarship on Paul is helpful both to appreciate the contribution of William Campbell and to discern the long-term implications of the scholarly trajectory put in motion by the ‘New Perspective’.

By 1960, as I was entering the field of Pauline studies with Franz J. Leenhardt, it seemed that scholarly interpretations of Paul had no options but to continue to read Paul and reflect on his letters within the confines of a long line of Western interpretations going from Augustine to modern Western scholarship that refined it with a solid critical exegesis. Of course, further studies of Romans were still necessary in order to continue to refine the understanding of this text across a chasm of 20 centuries. So, there was a never ending stream of new studies of Romans and related topics. Yet, this stream of studies was rigorously canalized through the control of the questions that could appropriately be asked. This Western scholarship strictly delimited the field of legitimate and plausible interpretations of Romans; reading the letter in a different way was deemed an irresponsible (illegitimate) betrayal of the text. The only legitimate exegeses were (and still are for many) framed by a detailed philological approach that carefully assessed the meaning of each word in Paul’s complex Jewish and Greco-Roman linguistic, cultural, religious, and philosophical contexts. These philological investigations were in turn framed by a quest for ‘the’ historical Paul aimed at elucidating how Paul crafted this language into a distinctive theological argument. The plausibility of these conclusions were assessed by demonstrating the coherence of Paul’s theological argument – an argument held together by anthropological concerns for individual faith, justification, and

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salvation, in line with the ‘introspective consciousness of the West’ (as Krister Stendahl\(^3\) called it). This exegesis and its results were normative. Theologians – including Karl Barth\(^4\) and Anders Nygren\(^5\) – who dared to develop interpretations which stepped outside the clearly marked boundaries of the field of legitimate and plausible interpretations were simply brushed aside; their commentaries were viewed as eccentric theological elaborations lacking any proper grounding into Paul’s text.\(^6\)

Opening different ways of reading Paul (such as the ‘new perspective’ and ‘apocalyptic’ readings of Paul) required to step outside the worldview framed by this dominant scholarly tradition – both an exegetical and a theological tradition. In addition to this creative intellectual feat, it was necessary to present these different readings of Paul in such a way that biblical scholars steeped in the traditional approach could recognize them as critical and worthy of consideration; being brushed aside, as the theologians and their interpretation were, would prevent any true contribution to Pauline scholarship. Thus, introducing new interpretations of Paul was a daunting task. It involved challenging ideological claims that established a certain scholarship and its results as the only true one – as the only legitimate and plausible way of reading Paul. Alone a cohort of scholars, each making his/her distinctive contribution, could hope to succeed.

William Campbell is part of this cohort. Much progress has been made. But when will we be in a position to say that we have succeeded? When the ideological claims of the old perspective are rejected and when another type of interpretation (a form of the ‘new perspective’) is established as the only legitimate and plausible way of reading Paul? This is a tantalizing prospect. Ah! Having a certitude about a Pauline teaching that would avoids all the traps of the introspective consciousness, patriarchalism, and anti-Judaism! Yet, in my estimation, inverting the ideological claims does not address the problem, but duplicates or even compounds it, because it would be, once again, avoiding to assume our ethical responsibility for our interpretive choices\(^7\). Hidden behind our certitude about ‘what the scriptural text says’ – even if our certitude is warranted by the most rigorous scholarship – like the fundamentalists of all stripes we can then be content to act according to ‘what the text says’ without assessing the effect of our actions upon others (and ourselves), because we erroneously believe we have no choice in interpretation.\(^8\) Thus, I want to argue that addressing the problem posed by the

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\(^4\) Karl Barth, Der Römerbrief (Bern: Büschlin, 1918 [with several subsequent editions]); See Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, translated from the 6\(^{th}\) edition by Edwin C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

\(^5\) Anders Nygren, Commentary on Romans. Translated by Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949 [Swedish original, 1944]).


\(^8\) Mieke Bal cogently argues and demonstrates through her analysis of a diversity of interpretations of the same text that the most effective way to challenge fundamentalists is to show them that other
monopolizing claims of traditional philological interpretations of Romans ultimately demands from us, critical biblical scholars, to acknowledge that taken together traditional and new exegetical approaches and their results actually offer to the readers a choice between equally legitimate and plausible interpretations, even though these are very different and often divergent from each other. Then we, readers, can recognize that we actually have a decision to make; choosing one or the other of these interpretations is far from being indifferent. Choosing an interpretation of a scriptural text always matters, because it affects people lives, and is too often a matter of life and death.

To account for these different interpretive choices, it is useful to make a distinction among ‘legitimate’ interpretations (that are appropriately grounded in the text), ‘plausible’ interpretations (that make sense, because their theological and hermeneutical arguments are coherent), and ‘valid’ interpretations (that have a positive value according to an ethical assessment of its effect in concrete contexts). After explaining why different kinds of exegesis can be viewed as equally ‘legitimate’, the ‘plausibility’ of different readings of Romans will easily be clarified and illustrated by presenting the three types of identity formation for Paul as the servant/slave of Christ Jesus in Romans 1.1. Then the reader will be left with a choice and the question: which is the interpretation which has a greater ‘validity’ (a contextual choice).

1. The ‘Legitimacy’ of Different Kinds of Exegesis of Romans: Analytical or Textual Choices

A first question raised by the preceding statements is: How can biblical scholars recognize as equally legitimate a plurality of divergent readings of Romans? A first condition is that each of these readings be shown to be fully anchored in the text through the use of rigorous critical exegetical methods.

The strangle-hold that the traditional exegetical methodology had in Pauline studies was broken from the outside by a broad methodological quest that was developed in the second half of the 20th century in hermeneutics (including hermeneutics of suspicion), linguistics, semiotics, cultural studies, post-modernism, feminism, post-colonialism. On this basis, biblical scholars developed a wide array of exegetical methods. For Pauline studies this meant that beyond the philological critical exegeses (framed in a quest for the historical Paul), one could envision using rhetorical analyses, and later narrative, ideological, cultural, political, literary, and structural approaches to study Romans. By recognizing that there is a plurality of critical exegetical methods, we become aware of the fact that we, as biblical scholars, have to make a choice, since these methods have different goals; and beyond this methodological choice, we can recognize that ‘ordinary’ readers necessarily make comparable choices – textual or analytical choices.

The rise of these new critical methods has commonly been viewed as part of an exegetical warfare: a new critical method and its new conclusions about what Romans ‘meant’ are claimed to be more accurate and thus to demand the rejection of the conclusions resulting from older methods. The new critical approaches are developed in interpretations are legitimate and plausible when one proceeds to readings that are even more ‘literal’ than their own – rather than denying the legitimacy and plausibility of their interpretations. See Mieke Bal, Loving Yusuf: Conceptual Travels from Present to Past (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
order to destroy the false claims of the old exegetical tradition. Alone the new exegetical methods, at first primarily rhetoric analysis, will provide the basis for a ‘legitimate’ interpretation of the text. For instance, the practitioners of rhetorical analysis claimed – or were perceived as claiming – that ignoring the rhetoric of Romans necessarily leads to an inappropriate understanding of Romans. Yet exegetes who continue to use philological approaches (in more and more sophisticated ways) reciprocated; convinced that their exegeses are legitimate, they simply ignore the highly arbitrary rhetorical studies of Romans.

From the perspectives of hermeneutics and semiotics – i.e., from the perspectives of research concerning how meaning is produced through communication and thus also in the reading process – this exegetical warfare is quite puzzling. Is it not yet clear that meaning is not contained in the text as container?

Rather than going into a theoretical discussion, let me make this point in very practical terms: Is it not clear what happens when one uses different critical methods? An illustration in synoptic studies makes it obvious. When we choose to use as exegetical method, for instance, form criticism, or redaction criticism, or oral hermeneutics, or narrative methods, instead of a quest for the historical Jesus, what have we done? We simply chose to view as most significant one or another feature of the Gospel texts. For instance, we can read Mark for the information it directly or indirectly provides about the historical Jesus, by paying close attention to the features of the text that can be shown to provide reliable historical information. But, we can change our focus and pay close attention to the forms of the pericopes, because these forms reflect the Sitz im Leben of particular traditions, and thus give us a glimpse of the development of the Jesus-tradition in very early church contexts. Or we can focus our attention on the redactional features of Mark because they reflect the theological perspective of the redactor (by contrast with the theological perspectives of earlier traditions, of the other Gospels, or of the historical Jesus); or on the oral/aural character of Mark (and its implication for making sense of this Gospel); or again on the plot and narrative characteristics of this Gospel text (because the text of Mark calls its hearers/readers to enter the story).

The point is quite simple: by choosing one critical method (rather than another), we choose one of the features of the text as most significant. All these different studies of the Synoptics are legitimate; each investigates specific features of Mark. Their respective results and conclusions are very different from each other, simply because they address different questions to the texts of Mark. Of course, one should not and cannot use the results of one approach to address the questions of another – or to criticize this other approach. This would be failing to recognize that different interpreters are interested in – find most significant – different features of Mark. Furthermore, the diversity of exegeses of Mark is enough to suggest that, as biblical scholars do, ‘ordinary’ readers make sense of a text by choosing one aspect of a Gospel as most significant, and by bracketing out other aspects of the text as less significant. And this is legitimate. Human beings make sense of a text or of a speech by focusing one aspect of this discourse, out of which they

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construct the meaning of the text for them. Biblical scholars do the same by using a diversity of critical methodologies. And this is legitimate. This brief illustration clarifies the flurries of studies of Romans. Traditional philological exegeses were, and continue to be, focused on certain features of the text that certain exegetes perceived as most significant, because it gave them access to the distinctive theological argument of the letter and to Paul’s theology – or more specifically, to the theology of Paul-the-theologian, a figure they constructed. By choosing this methodology (with many variants) exegetes choose as most significant the features of the letter characterized by Paul’s key theological concepts. The study of the history of each concept (philology) clarifies the particular way in which Paul uses it and re-crafted it so that it might contribute to his theological argument. The exegetes justify their choice of certain textual features as most significant by another construct: a conception of the purpose of the letter. Romans is viewed as addressing readers/hearers with the same kind of interests and needs as the exegetes: Christians in Rome who do not know Paul and have a very approximate knowledge, if not a wrong understanding, of Paul’s gospel, and who need a systematic clarification of the theological points about which there might be misunderstandings.

There is nothing extraordinary or illegitimate in all these exegetical moves. Any exegetical study involves envisioning the author (here, Paul-the-theologian) and the effect of the discourse (its purpose), and ‘constructing’ them in such a way that they make sense for us. Of course, as any interpreter, we construct these in our image; this is the hermeneutical circle necessary for any meaningful interpretation, which is legitimate as long as we acknowledge its role, as Gadamer taught us. There is nothing extraordinary or illegitimate in this choice of significant features in Romans. Any didactic discourse, such as Romans, includes an argument that unfolds somewhat like a narrative (actually it presupposes a narrative or a meta-narrative). This dimension of any didactic discourse is commonly viewed as the most significant feature of a text by common readers as well as by scholars, because it conveys specific information and ethical teaching to which one can readily respond or even implement. This is an important dimension of Romans that needs to be accounted for – in the same way that focusing on the redactional features of Mark is a good way to elucidate Mark’s theology.

Both philological studies of Romans and redaction critical studies of Mark are legitimate interpretations. But only insofar as one recognizes their limitations. In the case of Mark, it is illegitimate to claim or to pretend that a redaction critical reading is the only way to understand this Gospel! As it would be illegitimate to demand that any of the other exegetical studies of Mark (the quest for the historical Jesus, form critical, oral/aural, narrative, or political studies) conform to redaction critical studies or contribute to these. These different methods are making sense out of different features of the Gospel text for different purposes. So it is with Romans. Philological exegeses of

12 Greimas’ semiotics describes this dimension as the ‘narrative syntax’ (or ‘didactic syntax’) of a discourse which elaborates on the ‘credo’ (the assertion, ‘I believe’) posited by a text and its elaboration into an ideological process – that can easily become ‘frozen’ (then potentially destructive). See the discussion of ‘narrative syntax’ in Patte, *Religious Dimensions of Biblical Texts.*
Romans and their agendas become illegitimate when scholars claim that they are the only way of understanding Romans and that other exegeses should conform to them.

The development of different exegetical studies of Romans by the ‘new perspective’ (and other alternate interpretations) should not be viewed as a ‘warfare’ against old interpretations, but rather as the exploration of textual territories that, so far, were ignored by critical exegesis. Thus one should not present a rhetorical study of Romans as rejecting philological studies of Romans and as denying the legitimacy of the philological presentation of Paul’s theological argument. Philological and rhetoric exegeses simply choose as most significant different features of the text that cannot and should not be directly compared. Each kind of exegesis is legitimate insofar as it faithfully represents the features of Romans it has chosen to study. The fact that philological and rhetoric exegeses reach different conclusions is actually a signal that each might be legitimately focusing on its chosen textual dimension.

Rhetorical studies focus, as can be expected, on the rhetorical features of Paul’s letters that reflect the dynamics of Paul’s interaction with his addresses, his concerns for the relations between Jewish and Gentile communities, and thus the ideological categories that frame these relations. This is another dimension of any discourse; the speaker/author necessarily engages her/his audience, in a hybrid semantic dimension that expresses the speaker/author’s views and points in terms of the intended audience’s views, and vice versa, combining them into ambivalent ‘discursive’ dimensions (as Greimas calls them) that can be read differently according to what the reading emphasizes. Once again, it is a dimension of a text that can legitimately viewed as the most significant and thus the basis of a legitimate interpretation of a text, provided, of course, that it does not claim an exclusive legitimacy.

The interest in the rhetorical features of Paul’s letters is not new. Bultmann’s dissertation was already devoted to the study of Paul’s use of the diatribe. Yet, Bultmann’s primary concern remained with Paul’s theology and thus with his theological arguments. Similarly Aletti paid close attention to the rhetoric of Romans, although his concerns remained with Paul’s theology. In both cases, rhetorical studies were perceived as a supplement to traditional studies, as part of a quest for the (singular) meaning of Paul’s letter to the Romans; they would contribute to refine our understanding of Paul’s theological argument. Since the rhetoric dimension of a discourse is hybrid, and includes a rhetorical ‘re-presentation’ of the theological argument for an audience, this is a legitimate claim . . . provided of course that one does not claim that

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13 Although the history of the reception of Romans shows they were important for many readers. See the ten volumes of the ‘Romans Through History and Cultures’ Series (T&T Clark).
14 This is not excluding that, as any scholarly interpretation, these philological studies should be viewed as ever in need of refinement.
15 Once again I avoid going into a technical semiotic discussion of Greimas’s semiotics. See the discussion of ‘discoursive structures’ in Religious Dimensions of Biblical Texts.
16 Rudolf Bultmann, Der Stil der paulinischen Predigt und die kynisch-stoische Diatribe (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910 [1984]).
this kind of study exhausts what is expressed in the rhetorical dimension of the text, or even that it provides the touch-stone to which all other interpretations must be measured.

With Stanley Stowers a detailed analysis of Paul’s rhetoric, combined with a fresh understanding of letter writing in that time, demanded to recognize that rhetorical features of Paul’s letter could be taken as the most significant features of Paul’s letter quite distinct from other dimensions of the letter – and especially distinct from its theological argument (reconstructed through philological studies). 19 Robert Jewett move in the same direction as he systematically structures his Hermeneia commentary on the basis of his rhetorical analysis of Romans that he complements with a related cultural analysis, emphasizing the honor-shame, community context of this rhetoric. 20 So did Neil Elliott who after his study of the rhetoric of Romans followed a different trajectory as he more and more read Romans as resistance literature, viewing the hybrid character of the rhetorical dimension of Romans as most significant. 21

Similarly, other exegetical studies focused on the figurative dimension of the letter to the Romans 22, which turn out to be made out of mostly apocalyptic figures, and thus developed what was called the ‘apocalyptic’ interpretations of Romans – including the studies of Ernst Käsemann 23, J. Christiaan Baker 24, Brendan Byrne 25, and most recently Douglas A. Campbell, 26 as well as my own interpretation. Similarly, the political interpretations focus on other distinctive features of the text.

The list could be much longer. But these brief bibliographical allusions are enough to make the point that different exegeses choose as most significant different features of the letter to the Romans, in which they strive to anchor their interpretations. As such, each is legitimate, properly anchored in a dimension of the text. Yet, most, if not all, fall into the trap of claiming, or of implying, that their distinctive interpretations establish a basic truth about Paul’s teaching, to which all other interpretations must conform. One cannot make such a claim without renouncing the legitimacy of one’s interpretation, which depends upon our acknowledgment that we made a textual choice: through our methodological choice, we chose to see as most significant certain features of the text, and thus to bracket out other dimensions of the text. Let us repeat: the fact that there exists a plurality of critical exegetical methods, shows us that we, as biblical scholars, necessarily make an analytical or textual choice; we choose to focus our interpretation on what we view as a particularly significant aspect of the text; by making

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22 What Greimas called the discursive semantics and it relationship to the fundamental semantics. See the discussion of these structures in Religious Dimensions of Biblical Texts.
23 Ernst Käsemann, Commentary on Romans Trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980 [German original 1974]).
explicit our own analytical choices, we help ‘ordinary’ readers recognize that they make comparable choices, by privileging certain textual features that they (often sub-consciously) perceive as particularly significant.

2. The ‘Plausibility’ of Different Kinds of Exegesis of Romans: Hermeneutical or Theological Choices

A similar argument must now be developed about another type of interpretive choices that readers cannot avoid when they seek to make sense of a religious text. Through a hermeneutical process closely linked with our cultural and religious milieux, we construct the theological, ethical, and epistemological concepts that we find in the text in such a way that they might be ‘plausible’ for us. In this case, becoming aware of the hermeneutical choices we spontaneously make requires from us to be confronted by the fact that one can conceive of these concepts in several ways. This is what Krister Stendahl has done for us in his essays in Paul among Jews and Gentiles by suggesting, for instance, that Paul’s ‘conversion’ (Gal 1.13-16) could also be conceived as a prophetic ‘call’; that Paul’s concept of ‘justification’ should not be confused with ‘forgiveness’; that rather than understanding ‘sin’ as ‘guilt’ (related to the ‘introspective consciousness of the West’), one could view it as ‘weakness’. This is also where the contribution of William S. Campbell is so important. Prolonging Stendahl’s questioning approach, Campbell challenged us, and continues to challenge us, to recognize how constructed are our views of many key concepts of Paul. He does this through his publications. Beyond the way the relationship between Jews and Gentiles has been posited for so long, throughout Paul and the Creation of Christian Identity he forces us to recognize that there are alternate ways of understanding in Paul concepts such as ‘revelation’, ‘community life’, ‘mission’, and, of course, ‘identity in Christ’ in all its shapes and for different people. But he has done and does so through his active participation in the Romans Through History and Cultures program in the Society of Biblical Literature (1998 to 2011; a program that he co-chairs at present).

Yet, in the same way as for the legitimacy of different interpretations, we are constantly tempted to develop a different plausible way of construing key Pauline concepts as part of a warfare against other interpretations which, in our view, ‘misconceive’ these concepts. There is no need to repeat here the same argument, mutatis mutandis. Once again, understanding Pauline concepts through a hermeneutical process framed by our cultural and religious milieux is not problematic in itself. We cannot avoid it. But, by becoming aware of other plausible ways of conceiving Paul’s concepts, we can recognize that we have made hermeneutical or theological choices, and thus can assume responsibility for our choices, by assessing the relative validity of alternative views. These points are best illustrated by an example: a triple exegesis of Rom 1:1 (in 1.1-7).

3. Three Types of Identity Formation for Paul as Servant of Christ Jesus in Romans (Rom 1.1-7).
In Rom 1.1-7 Paul uses the traditional letter address formula, ‘(From) Paul . . . to all those in Rome’, but greatly amplifies it in these opening verses. He introduces himself (1.1), expands this self-presentation through a summary of the gospel (1.2-4) and of the goal of his apostleship (1.5-6), then identifies his addressees, the Romans (1.7), whom he describes in terms which parallel his self-presentation. Thus we can ask: How is this relationship between Paul and the Romans constructed?

As we consult several commentaries we discover that biblical scholars conceive of the relationship between Paul and the Romans in different ways, which for simplicity sake can be viewed as belonging to three family of interpretations: those who envision this relationship as: a) a vertical, top-down, authoritative relationship; b) a vertical, from-the-ground-up, pastoral relationship; c) an horizontal mutual relationship.

A first group of interpreters, who perform what I shall call a ‘Theological Exegetical Reading’, conceive of the relationship of Paul to the Romans as that of an apostle with the authority to preach and teach the gospel (1.1) to Christians in Rome (1.7) viewed as people who should recognize the authority of Paul and of the gospel he teaches (1.2-4), because of their ‘obedience of faith’ (1.5-6). For these interpreters, Paul seeks to convey an authoritative theological teaching to the Romans; for this purpose, he affirms his own authority and that of his theological message, the gospel. In this type of interpretation, often represented by e.g., M.-J. Lagrange, Adolf Schlatter, Franz J. Leenhardt, C. E. B. Cranfield, Peter Stuhlmacher, Joseph Fitzmyer, Douglas Moo (and at times, James Dunn),27 the interpreters put themselves in the position of the original readers. They read Paul with the expectation to receive an authoritative ‘theological’ teaching from him.

For a second group of interpreters, who perform what I shall call a ‘Pastoral Rhetorical Reading’, the relationship between Paul and the Romans is centered on the needs of the Christians in Rome (rather than on Paul and his authoritative teaching). Thus it is envisioned as a ‘pastoral’ relationship between an apostle and minister of the gospel (15.16) and the churches in Rome; Paul is primarily concerned by their needs – and (as become clear later) by the tensions between Jewish and Hellenistic (Gentile) Christians. Paul embodies these tensions in his own person as the apostle to the Gentiles (1.5). Furthermore he presents the Romans as also embodying this tension, by associating them with the Gentiles (1.6), even as he is careful to refer to what they value, namely Jewish Scriptures and Jewish understandings of the gospel and of Jesus Christ as Lord (1.3-4). In this type of interpretation, often represented by e.g., Krister Stendahl, William S. Campbell, Stanley Stowers, John Gager, (at times, James Dunn), Robert Jewett, interpreters pay close attention to the ways in which the letter is designed to affect its Roman readers—and thus to the rhetorical features of this discourse.

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27 As long as biblical scholars strive to present ‘the’ only legitimate and plausible interpretations of Romans, they feel they have to respond to potential objections from all other scholars. As a consequence, they move back and forth among different ways of reading Romans – for instance, refuting an objection on the basis of another type of interpretation, before returning to their main approach. These scholars are listed here, and below, together with the type of interpretation which is predominant in their work.
A third group of interpreters, who perform what I call a ‘Messianic-Apocalyptic Figurative Reading’, conceive of the relationship between Paul and the Romans as the reciprocal relationship of members of the body of Christ. This reading takes note of the parallelism between Paul’s self-presentation in 1.1 and his presentation of the Romans in 1.7. While they have distinctive role, respectively as ‘apostle’ and as ‘saints’, both Paul and the Romans are inscribed in the eschatological horizon of the time of the Messiah, Christ Jesus. The letter is thus read as establishing the symbolic world in which Paul and the Romans can view each other as partners with complementary roles (‘apostles’ and ‘saints’) to which they are respectively ‘called’ as members of the body of Christ. In this type of interpretation, often represented by Albert Schweitzer, Ernst Käsemann, J. Christiaan Beker, Daniel Patte, Brendan Byrne, Douglas A. Campbell, interpreters pay close attention to the ways in which Paul’s letter as a figurative discourse invites its Roman readers to share in its symbolic world by constructing it in terms of religious texts and traditions they value.

3. The Analytical and Textual Choices establishing the Legitimacy of Three Interpretations of Rom 1.1-7: Some Illustrations

a) The Theological Philological Exegesis: Paul as an apostle set apart for the gospel and with an authority that the Romans should recognize; the theological construction of the Paul-Romans relationship. This first type of interpretation is set within a particular construct of the historical situation. Paul’s primary concern in Rom 1.1-7 is to establish from the outset the proper theological framework in which his authority as an apostle should be understood by the Romans. This is necessary because he writes to churches in Rome who do not know him personally and, therefore, know him only through his notoriety as a controversial apostle to the Gentiles. After the controversies regarding his authority as an apostle in Galatia, in Corinth and possibly elsewhere (see Philippians), he knows that many negative reports about his ministry circulate among the churches, including those emanating from Jerusalem (15.31). Thus he wants to make sure that the Romans have a proper, first-hand understanding of his ministry and of the gospel he proclaims. This is why he expends the traditional opening formula of the letter by spelling out his qualification as an apostle (1.1) and offering a traditional summary of the gospel (1.2-4). Calvin Roetzel’s succinct comments represent well this first kind of interpretation:

Writing to a church that he has neither founded nor visited, Paul was eager to establish the “orthodoxy” of his gospel and the legitimacy of his apostleship. In some quarter Paul was looked upon as a theological maverick, and an interloper (if not a troublemaker) in the apostolic circle. It is quite likely that Paul’s awareness of his notoriety inspired the baroque formulation in Romans 1:1-7. . . . The message he proclaims [summarized in Rom 1:2-6] is no dangerous innovation...  

In this interpretation found in many commentaries (e.g., Cranfield, Moo, Dunn, Stuhlmacher, Lagrange, Schlatter, Fitzmyer, Keck, and Johnson), the address posits that the purpose of this letter is to resolve potential theological misunderstandings regarding Paul’s ministry and teaching, so as to clear the way for Paul’s visit in Rome (1.10) and to gain support from the Roman churches for his projected missionary activity in Spain (15.24). In the same way that 1.1-7 sets the relationship of Paul as an apostle to the Romans in a proper theological framework, so the rest of the letter is to provide the proper theological view of the gospel that Paul preaches to readers who might have suspicions and misunderstandings about it. In sum, for this reading, the most significant in this letter – ‘the intention of the historical Paul’ – is the theological view it conveys. Paul’s ministry and his relationship to the Romans is that of a ‘prophet’ who authoritatively proclaims to others a message that he has received from God. The first sentence of Moo’s comments on the epistle to the Romans concisely expresses (in an almost caricatural way) the overall view that one has of this document from this perspective: ‘The main body of Romans is a treatise on Paul’s gospel, bracketed by an epistolary opening (1:1-17) and conclusion (15:14-16:27)’.  

b) The Pastoral Rhetorical Exegesis: The pastoral relationship of Paul with the Romans as a rhetorical dynamics. According to this second type of interpretation of Rom 1.1-7, Paul’s primary concern is to establish from the outset the proper rhetorical dynamics between him and the Romans. Without ignoring the theological content of these verses, the focus of the interpretation is reversed. Paul’s primary concern is not self-centered (aimed at insuring that his gospel and his authority as an apostle be properly understood), but centered upon the Romans and their needs. Paul’s goal is to meet certain pastoral needs that the Christians in Rome have, as the description of the Romans in 1.6-7 and its amplification in 1.8-15 makes clear. Thus in 15.15-16, as Paul looks back to what he has tried to do throughout this letter, Paul acknowledges that he might have been quite ‘pushy’ as he tried to lead the Romans to change their way of life as churches. But he also insists that it is a part of his role as ‘a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God’ (15.16, NRSV). In sum, from this perspective, in 1.1-7 Paul seeks to establish a pastoral relationship between himself and the Romans, so that he might be in a position to address their needs for pastoral care and direction.

This pastoral goal of the entire letter is already apparent in 1.1-7 when one pays attention to the rhetorical features of the letter. According to the rhetoric of Paul’s time, these introductory verses are the exordium. As Robert Jewett notes ‘The exordium not only introduces the speaker in a manner calculated to appeal to the audience and lend credence to the speaker’s cause, but it also frequently introduces the topics to be

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30 Moo, Romans, p. 39.
addressed in a speech’.³¹ In agreement with Samuel Bryskog, Jewett further underscores that, as the exordium, 1.1-7 presents ‘Paul’s right and authority to write or speak persuasively to the Romans’, ³² as an ambassador presents his credential in diplomatic rhetoric of the time (as Jewett also notes). Yet the point of 1.1-7 is not simply to establish his authority; it also and primarily ‘draws the Roman believers into Paul’s vocation as an apostle’ (so Jewett), an apostolic ministry which Paul presents as a ‘priestly’ ministry (so Jewett) or more generally as a ‘pastoral’ ministry, rather than as a prophetic ministry.³³

c) The Messianic Figurative Exegesis: The reciprocal relationship of Paul and the Romans as members of the body of Christ in its eschatological horizon. This third type of interpretation of Rom 1.1-7 emphasizes that anything in Paul’s letters must be read in terms of the ‘figures’ that express the eschatological, messianic horizon through which Paul envisions everything in his present. In Rom 1.1-7 Paul makes clear that he envisions his relationship with the Romans within this eschatological horizon by the figures he uses and the structure of this introductory unit.

The eschatological character of the most prominent figures in 1.1-7 can readily be recognized. Speaking of Jesus as the ‘Christ’ (1.1, ‘slave of Christ Jesus’) is not, for Paul, using a proper name; it is quietly affirming, from the outset, that Jesus is Messiah, and therefore that Paul and the Romans (and subsequent readers sharing in this vision) live during the messianic age inaugurated by Christ. During this end-time God’s promises are supposed to be fulfilled. Thus the gospel is the fulfillment of the prophets (1.2). The Spirit of God is again manifested among his people (1.4). This is the time of the resurrection of the dead; indeed Christ has been raised from the dead (1.4). This is also the time when Gentiles at last come to God and glorify God; and this process has began through Paul’s ministry (1.5) from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern Albania; see 15.19), but also elsewhere including in Rome (1.6) through the ministry of the ‘saints’ in Rome (1.7-8). When viewed against this eschatological horizon, Paul’s ministry (1.1) and also the Romans’ ministry (1.7-8; 16.1-16) belong together as the shared ministry of ‘apostles’ (1.1; 16.7) and ‘co-workers’ (16.9, 16.3). The Romans as well as Paul are ‘in Christ’ (16.1-16) or belong to Christ (1.1) the Lord (1.6-7) and as such share a vocation (being ‘called’ 1.1, 6, 7) which requires ‘obedience of faith’ (1.5, 16.26). Indeed, when one pays attention to the figurative structure of this introduction, namely the parallel descriptions of Paul (1.1) and of the saints in Rome (1.7), as well as the parallelism of the introduction (1.1-7) with the conclusion of the letter (16.1-27), it becomes clear that the ministry of the gospel involves a reciprocal relationship, because both Paul and the Romans are ‘in Christ’, and ‘mutually encourage’ (NRSV) and ‘strengthen’ (NJB) each other ‘through each other’s faith’ (1.12). In the eschatological messianic time, there is only one hierarchical relationship which counts, namely the ‘obedience of faith’ (1.6), that is, the submission to Christ as Lord (ku/ri-oj). Paul wants to share with the Romans the grace he has received: apostleship, being set apart for the gospel (1.1-6; 1.15); yet he also acknowledges that they have themselves received a grace, sainthood, to

³¹ Jewett, Romans, p. 96.
³³ Jewett, Romans, p. 97.
which they have been called (1.7), and a faith-obedience (1.6, 12) that Paul expect them to share with him, so that he might in turn be comforted, encouraged, empowered by them (1.12), as a detailed interpretation of these verses further shows.

4. The Hermeneutical and Conceptual Choices establishing the Plausibility of Three Interpretations of Rom 1:1: Some Illustrations

a. ‘Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus’ (1.1a), and the Construction of Paul’s Identity

How should Paul’s metaphorical self-designation, “a slave of Christ Jesus”\(^{34}\), be understood?

Most significantly, ‘slave of Christ Jesus’ is a technical phrase (as M. Brown underscores).\(^{35}\) It can be unpacked by taking note that it is a metaphorical self-designation; Paul’s relation to Christ is like the relationship of a ‘slave’ to his master. This is a complex concept that can be, and actually is, constructed in very different ways.

As with any metaphor, we have to ask a twofold question: Which one of the several connotations of ‘slave’ defines what is like the relationship between Paul and Christ? What other connotations of ‘slaves’ are left aside as inappropriate, because ‘obviously’ they are unlike the relationship between Paul and Christ, and thus not the point of the comparison?

There are no definite answers to these questions. Actually we interpreters choose to privilege one connotation over others because of our pre-understanding (what we take to be ‘obvious’) regarding the relationship between Paul and Christ – as well as because of our exegetical choices. We cannot be definite and claim what Paul’s intention actually was. Very learned scholars simply do not agree. Thus, the best we can do as readers of Romans is to account for their divergent readings. Who are we to dismiss any of these learned scholars, even if it is in the name of the newest interpretations that reflect a present day scholarly consensus? Soon enough this ‘new’ interpretation will be out of date. More importantly, as discussed above, even if we could determine Paul’s intention, the other connotations that Paul evoked through his discourse should not be excluded, because they might still be the most significant for one group or another of Paul’s readers and hearers – among whom, in Paul’s time, Gentiles Christians (1.5-6) and also Jewish Christians in Rome, and possibly elsewhere (including in Jerusalem, mentioned in 15.15-31), as well as readers throughout history.

The three primary understandings of this opening metaphoric self-designation reflect three major connotations of the term ‘slave’. A ‘slave’ is:

• Someone who is owned by a master, and thus who is in bondage and totally at the mercy of this master; someone worthless, powerless, in an abject situation, with a shameful status (emphasized by the Apocalyptic Messianic Reading);

• Someone who, although in a low status, is a member of a household as a socio-economic unit, and who, as a servant, acts in the name of his/her master for the

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\(^{34}\) I will not go here in the textual critical discussion regarding the variant ‘Jesus Christ’ rather than ‘Christ Jesus’ and why if one adopts the theological philological interpretation one might want to prefer the variant.

sake of the household; someone totally defined by his/her mission in the name of a master (emphasized by the Pastoral Reading);
• Someone who is unconditionally submitted to the will and authority of a master (emphasized by the Theological Reading).

At first, these three connotations may seem so closely related that one might want to say that Paul included all of them in his metaphorical self-designation. But it soon appears that making sense of the metaphor ‘Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus’ involves choosing one of these major connotations as primary, bracketing out the other connotations as beside the point.

Which connotation to choose is not resolved by the possible allusion to the many uses of the term in the Old Testament. Indeed, the term δουλός in the LXX, a translation of דָבָר, is used as a designation for figures as different as Abraham (e.g., Ps 105.42), Moses (e.g., 2 Kings 18.12; Neh 9.14; Ps. 105.26), Joshua (Josh 24.30), Judges (e.g., Samson, Judges 15.18; Samuel, 1 Sam 3.9-10), Elijah (e.g., 1 Kings 18.36), David (e.g. 1 Sam 23.10-11; 2 Sam 3.18; 7.15), the prophets (e.g., Jer 7.25, 25.4; Ezek 38.17; Dan 9.6; Amos 3.7; Zech 1.6), the ‘servant of Yahweh’ (Isaiah 49.1-8); and of the People of God as a whole (e.g., Deut 32.36) and the worshippers in the Psalms (e.g., Ps 27.9; 30.17; 116.16; 119.17). One or the other of the connotations for ‘slave’ is perceived as the most appropriate according to which particular Old Testament figures are viewed as corresponding to Paul and to the way in which this correspondence is understood.

For the three interpretations, it is striking that ‘Christ Jesus’ assumes the role of God, or Yahweh, in the phrase ‘servant/slave of Yahweh’; Christ Jesus ‘our Lord’ (1.4) shares in the authority of the Lord God. Beyond this core agreement, the interpretations of the correspondence between the Old Testament figures and Paul diverge. This correspondence can be focused:
• on these OT figures as ‘instruments’ through whom God acts, with a prophetic function, despite the unworthiness and lack of ability of those persons—a connotation which is further reinforced if one keeps in mind that, for the Romans, the phrase ‘slave of Christ’ will brings to mind the phrase ‘slaves of Caesar’ (first connotation of ‘slave of Christ’; Apocalyptic Messianic Reading, Käsemann, J. C. Beker, Jewett, and Brown);36 or
• on these OT figures’ willingness to accept a special role given to them by God who has chosen them for a special mission and sends them to speak and act in God’s name (second connotation of ‘slave of Christ’; Pastoral Reading, Stuhlmacher, Dunn, Byrne, and Toews),37 or again
• on these OT figures’ total, humble submission to God’s will (third connotation of ‘slave of Christ’; Theological Reading, Lagrange, Schlatter, Cranfield, Leenhardt, Barrett, Fitzmyer, and Moo).38

37 Stuhlmacher, Romans, pp. 18-19; Dunn, Romans, pp. I.7-8; Byrne, Romans, p. 38; J.E. Toews, Romans (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 2004), p. 38.
38 Lagrange, Romans, p. 2; Schlatter, Romans, p. 7; Cranfield, Romans, pp. I.50-51; Leenhardt, Romans, p. 21; C.K. Barrett, A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans HNTC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), pp. 15-16; Fitzmyer, Romans, pp. 228-229; and Moo, Romans, pp. 40-41.
It is to be noted that according to which understanding of Paul’s metaphorical self-designation one chooses, one also chooses to emphasize certain connotations of ‘Christ Jesus’:

- Christ’s power upon the ‘slave’ (according to the first view of slave chosen in the Apocalyptic Messianic Reading);
- Christ’s mission which the ‘slave’ prolongs in the name of the Lord (according to the second view of slave chosen in the Pastoral Reading);
- Christ’s authority to which the ‘slave’ voluntarily submits (according to the third view of slave chosen in the Theological Reading).


This second part of 1.1 involves three central concepts for which we find diverging interpretations: the ‘call’ of Paul (further described as a ‘setting apart’); ‘apostle’; ‘gospel of God’.

The ‘call’ and ‘setting apart’ of Paul. The adjective ‘called’ (klhto/j) has the sense of a perfect passive participle, and therefore most commentators read it as a divine passive: Paul has been ‘called by God’. For Paul, the Roman Christians (1.6, 7) and more generally all Christian believers (8.28, see also 1 Cor 1.1, 2, 24) have also received a ‘divine calling’.40 The same can be said about the actual perfect passive participle ‘set apart’ (ἀφωρισµένος). Whether or not this term alludes to God’s setting apart Israel as his people (Lev 20.26) or the Levites for a priestly ministry (Num 8.14), or again if it plays on the possible meaning of ‘ Pharisee’ (someone ‘separated’, see Phil 3.5),41 this divine calling or setting apart can be understood in three ways, according to whether one puts the emphasis:

- on the origin of the call and setting-apart, namely, God, and the significance and necessity of God’s intervention in the present of the recipient (Apocalyptic Messianic Reading);
- on the effect of the call and setting-apart upon the recipient(s), Paul (1.1) or the Romans (who are called, 1.6, 7); through this call and setting-apart Paul gains a special status as ‘personally related to God’ and, therefore, is invested with a special authority (Theological Reading);
- on the vocation, i.e., the task for which one is called, set-apart; the call as entrusting the recipient with a specific task: ‘apostleship’ for Paul, ‘sainthood’ for the Romans (1.6-7); Paul is set-apart ‘for the gospel’. Then 1.1b must be read with 1.1c, as translated by Jewett: ‘an apostle called [and] set apart for God's gospel’ (my emphasis).42 (Pastoral Reading).

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39 Jewett’s elegant translation of 1:1b-c (κλητὸς ἀπόστολος ἀφωρισµένος εἰς εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ) making clear the relationship between 1.1b and 1.1c. NRSV: ‘called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God’.
40 Barrett, Romans, p. 16.
41 An alternative mentioned by several commentators, see e.g., Fitzmyer, Romans, p. 232; Jewett, Romans, ad loc.
42 Jewett, Romans, p. 95.
Apostle. ‘Apostle’ (ἅπόστολος) is part of a cluster of terms that refers to someone who is sent in behalf of someone else: in the political sphere, someone sent as an ambassador; in the religious sphere, someone (e.g., philosophers) sent by the gods. In the LXX, this is a frequent language that applies to different persons sent in behalf of others or of God. In Isaiah 6.8 this language refers to the one who goes on behalf of the Lord and proclaims the prophetic message. For most scholars the distinctive use of ‘apostle’ in early Christianity reflects the LXX usage, and refers to ‘one who, through a vision of the risen Lord, has become an official witness to his resurrection and who has been commissioned by him to preach the gospel in a way fundamental to its spread’. But beyond this consensus, ‘apostle’ can be read with three different emphases.

- A Pastoral Reading understands it as specifying the ‘vocation’ of Paul as ‘apostleship’, focusing on the purposes and goals of apostleship by underscoring, with 1.1c that it is ‘for the gospel of God’.
- A Theological Reading emphasizes ‘apostle’ as a title signaling Paul’s authority; his authority is derived from the origin of his apostleship: God who sends him, and who gave him the message he proclaims.
- An Apocalyptic Messianic Reading emphasizes the ways in which the one who is sent is qualified—empowered, equipped—to be an instrument of God because of God’s intervention in this person’s life; its focus is on the transformation of Paul resulting from God’s intervention.

Gospel of God. The phrase ‘gospel of God’ (εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ, also in 15.16) is understood in three radically different ways according to how one constructs the genitive. With Schlatter, Fitzmyer and Moo we have to ask three questions.

- Is the ‘gospel’ a message ‘about God’ (objective genitive)—when one envisions ‘gospel’ in terms of its message-content (e.g., with Cranfield, Leenhardt, Barrett, Stuhlmacher, and also, ultimately, Moo)?
- The Theological Reading chooses to emphasize this understanding of ‘gospel of God’, as it conceives of the ‘gospel’ as a theological, doctrinal message about God and about what God has done and revealed in Christ (1.2-5). Or,
- Is the gospel ‘from God’ (genitive of origin)—when one envisions ‘gospel’ primarily in terms of its origin, as a further specification of Paul’s vocation as apostle (e.g., with Fitzmyer, Dunn, and Jewett)? The Pastoral Reading chooses to emphasize this second understanding, because it also underscores that the phrase ‘gospel from God’ makes it clear that the gospel is from the God of Israel. Thus, far from being a radically new message about God (a doctrinal statement), this phrase already reflects Paul’s pastoral concern regarding the conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christians (see Jewett [on 1:1] following Moxnes).

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44 A. Schlatter, Romans, pp. 7-8; Fitzmyer, Romans, pp. 232-3; Moo, Romans, 42-3.
45 C.E.B. Cranfield, Romans, p. 52; Leenhardt, Romans, p. 21; Barrett, Romans, p. 16; Stuhlmacher, Romans, p. 19; Moo, Romans, pp. 42-3.
46 Fitzmyer, Romans, pp. 232-33; Dunn, Romans, p. 110; and Jewett, Romans, p. 102.
phrase affirms the continuity of the gospel with the revelation of the (Hebrew) holy scriptures (as 1.2 confirms). Or

- Is the gospel ‘God’s gospel’, that is the ‘gospel (spoken) by God’ (subjective genitive)—when God is ‘the one who speaks through the message’?48 The Apocalyptic Messianic Reading chooses this third understanding according to which the proclamation (gospel) is an action of God (e.g., with Schlatter, and Käsemann).49 God’s gospel is a performative word through which God affects those to whom it is addressed. It is a manifestation of God’s power (as Paul makes explicit in 1.16: ‘…the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. . .’ NRSV). Thus, for this reading which continues to pay attention to all the textual expressions pointing to God’s active role in the messianic time inaugurated by Christ, the gospel is an intervention of God in Paul’s and the Romans’ experience (as emphasized by Käsemann).50

Actually, by choosing to emphasize one or the other alternative (even when they claim that this is a general genitive encompassing the three alternatives, Cranfield, Moo, Keck actually give priority to one or the other), scholars show that the phrase εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ carries each of these connotations, and that it makes a difference which alternative is selected as the most significant.

5. Overture

The brief example above illustrates that three interpretations of Romans 1.1 can be shown to be equally legitimate and plausible. Each represents a set of interpretive choices that are properly grounded in the text (and thus each is legitimate) and each presents a coherent, meaningful understanding of what Paul says through his rich language (and thus each is plausible). I know colleagues – including William S. Campbell – would want to say that at least the theological philological interpretation is neither legitimate nor plausible and that the apocalyptic messianic figurative interpretation is dubious. My concern with this autocratic claim according to which only one interpretation is legitimate and plausible is, as pointed above, that it makes the promoted interpretation illegitimate and indeed also implausible.

Instead one should acknowledge the legitimacy and plausibility of other interpretations, taking them seriously and respecting the scholarship of their proponents. Then, one can investigate why we are so passionately opposed to other interpretations, namely because we put into question its validity. Joining William Campbell I want vehemently to reject the theological philological interpretation as ‘invalid’ (lacking value), indeed as a very dangerous interpretation because of the supersessionism and anti-Judaism it promotes. Indeed, this is the ground upon which we choose a certain interpretation over others; not so much because we cannot see other significant aspects of a text nor because we cannot make sense of other kinds of hermeneutical and theological concepts, but because we ‘feel’ the moral validity of one choice of interpretation over another. This does not mean that we can trust our feeling. Carefully assessing, through an ethical evaluation, the validity or the lack of validity of each interpretation in actual life-contexts is part of the critical task of a biblical scholar.

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48 Schlatter, Romans, p. 8.
49 Käsemann, Romans, 6-10.
50 Käsemann, Romans, pp. 6-10.