

THE OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS OF ROMANS

UNCOVERING THE JEWISH SCRIPTURAL
TRADITION IN PAUL'S GOSPEL

A photograph of a large, mature tree with a thick trunk and sprawling branches. The tree's extensive root system is exposed, growing over and through a low, ancient stone wall. The background is filled with dense tropical foliage and trees under a bright sky.

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ONLINE
RENEWING MINDS THROUGH BIBLICAL TEACHING

Paul, a slave of King Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for God's good news, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the sacred writings – the good news about his son, who was descended from David's seed in terms of flesh, and who was marked out powerfully as God's son in terms of the spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead: Jesus, the king, our Lord!

Romans 1:1-4

Uniquely Scriptural

The Letter to the Romans is significantly different from most of Paul's other writings in its use of the Hebrew Scriptures. Paul knew his Hebrew Scriptures, and employed them liberally, both by direct quotation from the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint, and through thematic resonance. Tracing these quotations, references, and allusions, as well as the Jewish concepts behind commonly misused Pauline language, can clue us into a lot in terms of how Paul interprets and redefines Israel's story around Messiah Jesus.

Romans is saturated in Scripture. It's as though right the way through Paul is determined to argue primarily in relation to Scripture. He draws on texts from each of the three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible (the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings), quoting a passage, expounding it, coming back to it later. But he doesn't use just one strategy all the way through. He alters his use of the Scriptures to the different subject matter in each section of the letter. In some sections, like chapters 1-4 and 9-11, he quotes a lot of Scripture directly. In chapters 5-8, though he

doesn't quote as much, he is nevertheless drawing on scriptural themes the whole time. We need to always be alert for where Paul is getting his ideas from.

As Paul says right at the beginning of the letter, the gospel which he's preaching is the gospel according to the Scriptures. And in his summary he writes about the Scriptures being given so that by patience and study we might have hope. Romans has a lot to do with movements of thought in which Paul sets up a sequence of ideas only to transpose it into something else, the whole time expounding the Scriptures.

Paul appears especially fond of the pictures of Adam and Abraham in Genesis (chapters 1-3 and 15, respectively). He's also fond of the Exodus story, not so much in explicit quotation, but definitely in the theme, particularly of Romans 5 to 8. Deuteronomy as well. One recent scholar has said that Deuteronomy 32 seems to be one of Paul's all time favourite chapters, and certainly there's a lot of it in Romans. Then there's the Psalms. Psalm 2, 8, 44, 110, and others are in the background.

Perhaps most particularly Isaiah 40 to 55 seems to suffuse Paul's writing pretty well throughout. When he talks about what the Messiah has done to fulfil the purposes of God so that Gentiles might join Israel in worship, this all comes together with a quote from Isaiah 11:10. Romans 15:12 quotes Isaiah, stating, 'There shall be the root of Jesse, the one who rises up to rule the nations; the nations shall hope in him.'

This completes a circle all the way from Romans 1:3-4 – the resurrection of Jesus, declaring him to be Son of God in power – to Romans 15:12 – the quote from Isaiah about the Messiah who rises to rule the nations. The whole rest of Romans is held together within that Messianic

statement, that Jesus has fulfilled God's promises and purposes for Israel.

Israel's Story

In Romans, Paul is drawing on and filling in one particular reading of the whole story of Israel. This was in order to say that the radical new event that has happened in Jesus has to be understood in relation to Israel's story, and vice versa. The story of Israel was never simply a story of a people going through history hoping for something better. It was always a story, even in the earliest traditions, shot through with the strange sense that the God who made the world wants actually to live with and amongst his people.

We see this when God calls Abraham. Abraham journeys to and fro and wherever he goes he builds a shrine and calls on the name of the Lord. So too with Jacob, who has the extraordinary vision of a ladder with God at the top and the angels coming and going. Jacob calls the place where he had this vision Bethel – the house of God.

We see this particularly at the time of the Exodus. It's easy to get weighed down in all the traumatic events of the book of Exodus, but the thing to keep your eye on is what Moses says to Pharaoh. 'Let us go so that we may worship our God in the wilderness'. I used to think that was just an excuse. I thought what Moses really wanted was just to take his people to the Promised Land.

Actually, the way the Exodus story works, when the people come out of Egypt and through the wilderness they are given the Law. Then they are given, in great detail, instructions for building the Tabernacle. This is the place where God is going to come and dwell with them. God is

already leading them with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, but they now have to build this strange, holy tent so that God will come and actually live in their midst.

As they settle in the Promised Land, eventually King David arrives and he decides he's going to build a permanent residence for God. The Temple in Jerusalem isn't just a religious building like you might think of your local church today. It's the whole purpose of the city. It's where God places his name to dwell with his people. Of course, come the time of the Exile, the real tragedy as seen in Ezekiel is that God has become so utterly fed up with the behaviour of the priests that God abandons the city and the Temple. This is why the Babylonians are able to come and take it.

But God promises to come back. The end of Ezekiel promises that there will be a new Temple, and then the glory of the Lord will return to dwell there forever. Similarly, Malachi, some years after the Exile, says the Lord whom they seek will suddenly come to his temple. Zechariah says much the same thing.

How Paul Understands Israel's Story

The long history of Israel has at its heart this strange elusive sense of presence and absence. To be the people of God means to be the people in whose midst God lives, because God has promised to be with his people. What does Paul do with that whole theme, which we might call the 'cultic presence' of Israel's God?

For a start, Paul writes about his own ministry in these same terms. Early on in Romans 1, he writes about serving God by his spirit in the

gospel of his Son. He uses priestly language about worship and prayer. When in Romans 12 Paul writes about the effect of the gospel, the first thing he mentions is sacrifice. 'Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice'. He calls this logical or spiritual worship. The worship he enjoins is all about people standing in the presence of God as intercessors. In the great climax of Romans 15:7-12, we find the whole point is to 'with one heart and voice glorify the one God'. This is the reason for Jesus messianic triumph in his resurrection. And again, in 15:14, Paul describes his own apostolic ministry in terms of his bringing the offering of the Gentiles to God.

Everything in Romans is suffused with this language of worship, intercession, and the presence of God. This is not just a matter of illustration. It is not a random metaphor taken from the old Jewish temple cult. It is one of the key strands right through the whole letter.

Cultic language also helps Paul explain the human problem. In Romans 1:18 and following, the very first thing he mentions about the dire straits humanity has got itself into is ungodliness. It is not sin. It's the fact that people have turned away from God. Sin is the result of that turning away. Paul's analysis of the plight of human beings goes all the way back to Israel's idolatry itself. One of the key verses quoted, from Psalm 106, is an echo back to the story of Aaron making the golden calf. The Psalm says, 'They exchanged their glory for the image of a calf that eats hay'. It's a dismissive how-could-they-possibly-do-it sort of moment. For Paul, that's exactly what the whole human race has gone and done.

No surprise, when Paul explains how God has solved this problem, he expresses it in cultic language, through the images of sacrifice and the mercy seat. The mercy seat is the place where, on the Day of Atonement, God meets with his people in grace. In Romans 3:24-26, the

death of the Messiah is the place where and the means by which the plight of human beings, and hence of the world, is ultimately dealt with.

In Romans 5, expressing the results of the justification explained in chapters 1 to 4, Paul writes about Jesus's followers now having access to the grace in which they stand. This too is cultic language. People are allowed right into the presence of God. In Israel's Scriptures, of course, only the high priest goes right into the holy of holies, which contained the presence of God, and then only for one day a year. All that changes because of what Jesus has done. So Paul says, 'We therefore rejoice in the hope of the glory of God'.

Glory as Royal Priesthood

We need to pause on the word 'glory'. It's a multiple word in the Bible, and people have written books just about that word itself. For Paul, it seems to be a word honing in on two ideas in particular. First, it is what other biblical writers referred to as the Royal Priesthood. These ideas of royalty, Jesus's messiahship, and priesthood all go very closely together. In Psalm 8 we find this picture of glory as being the human destiny. Humans are the ones who bear the image of God, meaning they are to reflect God's glory into the world. In other words, they are to be God's co-rulers in bringing wise, gracious stewardship to bear on the world. Revelation talks about humans being rescued by the blood of the Lamb so that they might be a kingdom and priests.

Second, the glory which refers to rule over the world also evokes that strange presence of God which comes to dwell with humanity. This is seen from the perspective of Ezekiel and Malachi and so on, as mentioned above. The whole New Testament says this long awaited

return of the divine glory is what happened in Jesus and is what's happening in the spirit. So we shouldn't be surprised when, in Romans 8, these themes of glory come rushing together and we find the remaking of humans by the spirit. This is so that humans can share the rule of the Messiah over his world, which is why New Creation can happen. Then also they are to be the means of and even the place where the glory of God comes to dwell.

As with John, so with Paul. The glory of God is known in the cross. The closer we get to glory in Paul, the closer we get to the theme of suffering. Paul sees all of this somehow contained in the cultic presence image. The Messiah followers are the true temple. Jesus is the one who has established a new relationship between God and the human race, and hence with the world. This recurs in Paul's statements about offering a true sacrifice of oneself in 15:9-12. It is the same worship drawn out from the Psalms, from Deuteronomy, from Isaiah: the worship in which the human race comes together with one heart and voice.

Throughout Romans we find Paul picking up the strands of Jewish expectation and royal priesthood. In a way, Paul is acting like a priest by enacting the priestly and sacrificial work of Jesus. He is also drawing out the priestly and sacrificial ministry of all those who belong to Jesus. In particular, those who belong to Jesus are called to be the people in whom the divine glory comes to dwell. That is enormously challenging. Paul knows that very well. It's very costly. Paul's bearing that cost himself and he expects those who read his letters to bear it as well.

Jesus as the Focal Point of Israel's Promises

In Romans, Jesus is central to what Paul wants to say about God's character, God's purposes, God's people, and God's future. This comes through in Paul's use of the Greek word Christos, from which we get the English Christ. I have stressed in my own work, over-against quite a lot of scholarship of the last hundred years, that when Paul uses the word Christos for Jesus he really does mean Messiah, the anointed one. The Christos was the true king promised by God to Israel. (Christos translated the Hebrew word for Messiah, which means 'anointed'.)

This makes sense in terms of Paul's world, where the word Christos was not a proper name. Even in the Christian writings subsequent to Paul, Jesus goes on being referred to very explicitly as Messiah. He is known as such even by non-Christian writers like the Jewish historian Josephus, who much later refers to James as the brother of the so-called Christos, the so-called Messiah. Clearly, the idea of Jesus as Messiah resonated long after Paul.

It is highly likely, then, that when we find Jesus referred to as Christos in Paul's arguments about the Scripture-shaped purposes of God, this is not just a proper name as so often it is for us. People sometimes talk about 'Jesus Christ' as though 'Jesus' is his first name and 'Christ' is his surname. Rather, for Paul, Christos is an honorific meaning that Jesus is the anointed one who sums up God's purposes for Israel and draws them to the point where they had been intended to go all along. Jesus is therefore the focal point of God's purposes for Israel and that becomes thematic for Paul's whole letter.

Paul Wasn't Starting A New Religion

This is important for understanding the particular messianic logic of early Christianity. The first century was a world in which religion and public life were all bound up together, such that the early Jesus followers would never have thought they were starting something called a new 'religion'. For them, what mattered was that the one true God had shown that Jesus was Israel's Messiah.

But what would that mean? There was no single identikit messianic package in the first century such that you could say a messiah would have to do this, that, and the other. There were various clusters of Scripture which different groups could call on, in different ways, at different times, to point to potential messianic behaviour. The people who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, drew on various sayings from the Old Testament to say what they thought the Messiah would be like when he came.

Different revolutionary groups as well throughout the first and second centuries AD. We're not quite sure which texts the supporters of Bar Kokhba – hailed as Messiah in AD130 – used to back up their claim, but the idea is that many Jews of the time were hoping, in some generalised way, for God to do what God had promised to do, with occasional focuses this way or that. Of particular popularity was the idea that a king would come who would defeat the great wicked enemies that were oppressing God's people. He would rebuild or cleanse the temple and usher in some sort of new rule, some new divine sovereignty to bear on the whole world.

It looks as though Jesus himself, and then his first followers, took this cluster of half formed expectations and gave it a radical new focus. That certainly is what Paul is doing when he says that the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth constitute the central messianic events, as though to redefine even what a messiah would be.

The foundation of the early church was not, then, about so-called ‘comparative religion’, as though the Jesus-followers were just claiming to have ‘a better system’ than those currently on offer. It was about what you might call messianic eschatology: that is, a view of God's purposes and God's future shaped around the claim that this person Jesus is the true Messiah.

Paul's message in Romans, therefore, is a deeply Jewish message for the whole world. We can imagine Paul as a young man, perhaps praying the great messianic Psalms when confronted with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, forcing him to think through those and thousands of other passages in quite a new way. He might well see this whole scriptural network of promises rushing together in and around Jesus. Throughout Romans, then, Paul picks up the story of Israel, going somewhere which nobody quite knew. And he's saying through the rhetorical crafting of the letter itself that where it was all going was to Jesus himself, Israel's Messiah and Lord of the world.

Paul's Very Jewish Gospel

This good news about Jesus has long roots. In the second verse of Romans, Paul wrote about those roots in the Scriptures. ‘God's good news, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the sacred writings.’ We can see in Romans, maybe more so than anywhere

else in the New Testament, the multiple ways in which the great stories of Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, the Exile and restoration, all come rushing together. That is because it isn't the case that Paul sees the Jewish Scriptures as a bunch of proof texts for his various doctrines. It's rather that the whole scriptural narrative is seen by Paul as a great story.

For Paul, the idea of good news goes back to the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 40, and again in Isaiah 52, we find this idea of a herald arriving with good news to say, At last the time has come. At last the time when God is going to become King. God is going to take his power and reign. Babylon and its gods are going to be dethroned. You are going back home and the glory of God will be revealed and all flesh will see it together. That's the good news.

When Paul is confronted with the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus, he pretty quickly realises that the good news spoken of by Israel's great prophets had come true, and that he was being commissioned to tell this good news around the world. This comes to particular expression in Romans 1:16-17 which says the gospel is God's power for salvation, because in the gospel God's righteousness is revealed.

The Christian world has got all sorts of wrong assumptions about salvation. If we allow Paul himself to explain what it means it may look rather different from what we might have imagined. Many people today think of salvation only as going to heaven when you die. It is very interesting that in Romans that idea is never mentioned once. Salvation is a word with roots deep in the Old Testament, where again and again it means God's rescue of his people from slavery, from exile, perhaps even from death, but particularly from what we would call this-worldly disasters. Salvation means rescue. It means God doing

something which means that the disaster or horrible situation is completely done away with, completely alleviated.

Verses 16 and 17 are perhaps one of the most famous pairs of verses anywhere in Paul. "I am not ashamed of the good news." It is an interesting thing to say, like a sort of double negative, 'not ashamed'. Why would he say that? Isn't that accusing yourself and excusing yourself at the same time? It may go back to words that Jesus himself said in Mark 8, for instance, when he says, 'Anyone who is ashamed of me and my words, of that person will the Son of Man also be ashamed'. Or it may go back beyond that still into the Old Testament, because Paul will later quote 'The one who believes in him will not be put to shame'. And Paul replies emphatically, 'No, I'm not ashamed'.

God's Covenant Faithfulness

This is like somebody pulling back a curtain to suddenly reveal things that were hidden all along. Paul believes that God has always been true to God's word, but that doesn't stop him from wondering, with all of Israel, when God is going to do the things which were promised. What are these things? You could go on a whirlwind tour in the Old Testament of the promises God has made. This starts with the promises to Abraham in Genesis 15, then reinforced with Isaac and Jacob. Then at the time of Exodus the promises to Moses. Then decisively and climactically in David. Indeed, covenant theology in the Old Testament often brings Abraham and David together, because what God promised to Abraham is to be fulfilled through David. Paul reads this to mean through the true king, the Messiah. The promises extend on into the future, so that in the Psalms and Prophets, especially in Isaiah, there is

the sense that the covenant faithfulness of God is not going to rest until God has done what was promised. This is not only for Israel, but through Israel for the whole creation, as in Isaiah 55.

This is a mighty theme right across the letter to the Romans. Paul unpacks the dense Romans 1:16-17 (quoted above) in 3:21-26, then fills it in by exposition of the Abrahamic Covenant in Romans 4. By time we get to Romans 9 to 11, the whole question is: has God been true to his word? Is God then unjust? Is God behaving unfairly? Do people know what it means that God is true to his covenant?

In Paul's exposition of Deuteronomy 30 in Romans 10 he is taking on precisely the passage in which God says, This is how I am going to restore my covenant people at last. The whole of Romans seems to be unfolding along the lines of the covenant faithfulness of God. No surprise when Paul sums it all up one more time, Romans 15:8 and following "the Messiah became a servant of the circumcised people in order to demonstrate the truthfulness of God – that is, to confirm the promises to the patriarchs, and to bring the nations to praise God for his mercy."

In the Jewish context, covenant faithfulness was all about renewal. You can see this in passages like Daniel 9, which draws in some detail on the long covenant passage in Deuteronomy 27 to 32 (another of Paul's favourites). Here we find a context of exile. Exile might, of course, be interpreted as a breaking of the covenant entirely. But as with Jeremiah and Ezekiel, so with Daniel and Deuteronomy. The point of the Exile is that this is what happens when God is faithful to the Covenant and God's people are unfaithful. This was always the terms of the Covenant. If the people are unfaithful, if they worship idols, if they commit sin,

then they will go into exile. This exile, though, will mysteriously turn their hearts again to God, and God will reestablish the Covenant.

In Daniel 9, Daniel prays about God's covenant faithfulness on both halves of that equation. He says, Yes, all this happened to us because you are righteous, because you are faithful to the Covenant. But now, precisely because of all your righteousnesses, all your acts of covenant faithfulness, please, isn't it time to restore us again? We know from writings of Paul's era, such as Fourth Ezra, that the passages in Daniel 9 and Deuteronomy 27 to 32 were being drawn on by many Jewish groups in order to express their prayer and puzzlement about when God was going to be faithful to the Covenant. What will it look like when God does what was promised? How is it all going to work out? They are clinging onto the idea of the truthfulness of God, the faithfulness of God, the righteousness of God as their lifeline of hope for the future. Paul says this has now been revealed in the gospel of Jesus the Messiah.

Justice as Covenant Faithfulness

How does this then work out? When God made the covenant in the first place, the whole idea was that this was how the whole world was going to be put right. That's what justice – righteousness – entails. In the Old Testament, it is part of the covenant faithfulness of God to react with extreme hostility to any idolatry which corrupts and destroys and defaces. In Romans 3:1-8 Paul again discusses the faithfulness, truthfulness, and righteousness of God, but he includes within that the fact that God is under obligation to sort the world out. Which means that wherever things have gone horribly wrong, where people have

really messed up God's world and plan and purposes, then God must react strongly against that. If God doesn't do that, then God is not a good God. As we know in our own world, if rulers and authorities fail to react when real wickedness is afoot, then they're not actually doing their job.

Wrestling with God's justice is a theme which is common to many Jewish texts of the period. It's natural to ask, 'Why is God delaying? Why doesn't God just foreclose on the whole world once and for all?' The answer, again and again in many Jewish texts, is that we have a generous creator God. God loves this world. God loves people. Foreclosing right now would cut things off too soon for many people.

In that sense, God's kindness is seen as allowing breathing space. Within that breathing space, the expectation is not to go on blundering about, assuming God doesn't care. Rather, God's people are to come into a different mode of being entirely. With that expectation, we find ourselves again in the world of Deuteronomy and the Prophets, who spoke of Israel being hard-hearted and stiff-necked, going into exile only to turn the corner of repentance and be invited back to covenant.

Deuteronomy 30 and so on said that God would transform Israel and transform their hearts so they would at last be his people. Paul echoes this sentiment of his Roman readers in 2:5, that by their hard, unrepentant hearts they are building up a store of anger for the day of anger, when God's just judgement will be unveiled. God will repay according to each one's deeds.

The Covenant Gone Awry

This ties to Paul's sometimes confusing bit in Romans 2:17 and following about the Jew and the Law. What Paul is probably saying, talking to his former self no less than his Jesus-following Jewish contemporaries, is that you, the Jew, are supposed to be the solution to the problem of decay. The Law doesn't provide an exception, but rather an obligation. When Paul writes, 'Supposing you call yourself a Jew. Supposing you rest your hope in the law. ... Supposing you believe yourself to be a guide to the blind, a light to people in darkness, a teacher of the foolish, an instructor for children', Paul is saying this was Israel's vocation, but that too has gone horribly wrong. Paul never denies this was the plan.

Pause on that point. It's hugely important for several elements in the argument that Paul will be making later on. In the Old Testament, we find the very shape of the early chapters of Genesis going this way. After the debacle of Genesis 3 and things getting worse through the time of the flood and the tower of Babel, God finally calls Abraham. God says, 'In your seed and your family all the families of the earth will be blessed'. Here is the Adam project rehabilitated. It is the idea of humans as the royal priesthood, under God and over the world, bringing justice into the world.

That's really crucial to understanding Paul's re-appraisal and re-appropriation of the entire Jewish theology that he had grown up with. It was that Israel, from Abraham onwards, is God's answer to the problem of Adam. But Israel has in fact gone the same way. Right at the heart of the foundation events of Israel there was already a worm in the apple, so to speak. You can track that all the way back to Abraham, who in one chapter believes these glorious promises and the next chapter

nearly blows the whole thing. Or to Aaron leading the people in making the Golden Calf while Moses is on the mountain with God. In fact, Paul reads the whole story of the Old Testament as summed up in passages from Isaiah and Ezekiel and elsewhere by claiming the story of Israel is of a people carrying the promises of God for the world, but who need those promises for themselves as well.

That runs on into the start of Romans 3 where we find Paul asking, So what was the point of being Jewish in the first place? If the Israelites who are carrying on these promises have blown it, then how is God going to be faithful to the covenant? That intensifies the problem interestingly in a way that is parallel to some other Jewish writings in Paul's day. There were writers writing after the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 looking at the complete debacle of God's people and asking, What has gone wrong? How on Earth is God now going to be faithful to the covenant? That's the problem that Paul is left with in the middle of Romans 3, to which then the answer comes in 3:21 and following.

Paul believes Israel's vocation as a nation is to show the rest of the world how to live a proper human life. And if Israel is to be the light of the world, then Israel itself ought to be blameless. Israel ought to be the people at whom the nations look and can't help but see the living God in their midst. What happened instead? In Romans 2:24 Paul quotes from Isaiah and from Ezekiel. Specifically, he quotes Isaiah 52:5 and Ezekiel 36:20. 'God's name is blasphemed among the nations because of you.' This is the very opposite of what ought to be happening. People see Israel and think, if they've got a God, he must be a pretty pathetic sort of god, because they are a hopeless people. The boast of the Jews as the answer to the problem of the world has apparently come to nothing.

What It Means To Be God's People

Paul is here picking up an idea from Jewish texts like Daniel 7, that God's people will share the rule of the messiah over the world. He says in First Corinthians 6, 'Don't you know that we will judge angels?' Paul has this idea that at the last day the judgement will be through Jesus the Messiah, but it will be shared among those who are his people, some of whom will be uncircumcised Gentiles. This is deeply shocking. In fact, Romans 2:27 constitutes a real slap in the face to anyone in the theological position or mindset that Saul of Tarsus himself would have held in the days before he met Jesus.

There is a reversal of roles, a redefinition of what it means to be a member of God's people, resonating throughout Romans. To make this whole argument, Paul draws on categories which he elsewhere regularly uses to talk about the new covenant people of the Messiah, formed not only from Jews but also from Gentiles.

Drawing on themes from Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, Paul claims 'the Jew' isn't the person who appears to be one, nor is circumcision what it appears to be. Those Old Testament passages speak of a day when God will circumcise the hearts of his people so that they will love him from the heart, so that they will be his people through and through, not only outwardly but also inwardly.

Covenant justice is all about God's faithfulness to his plans and promises. Even in Romans, this covenant justice goes back through Isaiah, the Psalms, Deuteronomy, all the way to Genesis with the promises to Abraham and the original purposes in creation. People have often tried to separate these off from one another. They've tried to

set aside the covenant with Israel and say it's just the covenant with creation now. Or that really we're just talking about individual humans being put right with God.

Let's not shrink Paul's gospel. As we read Romans, we see the whole thing: creation, Israel, and human beings are the recipients of God's salvation because in the gospel God's covenant justice is unveiled. God is revealed as being true to the promises, and this is what it looks like. In being true to the promises, God is being just, putting the world right. It is as though the resurrection of Jesus is the core statement of what God is going to do for all the world. Taking the dead body of Jesus, Israel's Messiah, and giving it new life is launching the plan of New Creation for the whole world.

Paul sums this up with a quote from the prophet Habakkuk: The just shall live by faith. This is quite difficult, because if you go back to Habakkuk, or indeed in other places where it's quoted, for instance in the letter to the Hebrews, the quotation comes out slightly different in almost each case. Scholars have argued about how precisely we should take this. My own view is that we need to look at the larger context. This is often the case with Paul, who quotes single lines from Scripture with the whole context in mind.

In Habakkuk, the prophet is looking at Israel in dire straits. They are in deep trouble because the pagan nations are rushing in and overtaking everything. The prophet sees nothing but doom and gloom all around. But then God says, No, you are not to panic. You are not to be alarmed. I am at work. I am bringing my purposes to pass. In this present time the righteous – or the just – will live by faith. This last phrase may mean 'by God's faithfulness'. It may also mean by their own human faithfulness. Paul has brought God's faithfulness and human faithfulness together

just a few verses before quoting Habakkuk, so don't be surprised if that is how he is using the quote.

The point is this: the world is undergoing tremendous convulsions. The first century was a particularly difficult and dangerous time to be alive, but God is doing a new thing. As the prophet saw, even in tumult, God's action in covenant faithfulness is the solid centre of assurance. It is a faith in the good news of God's own faithfulness which then constitutes people as God's righteous people, the ones reckoned to be in the Covenant.

Son of God Language

Let's return to the beginning of the letter. Romans 1:3-4, the good news is God's good news about his son. To say, 'The Son of God' already draws together lots of Old Testament strands to reapply them in a new way. That is because in the Old Testament 'the Son of God' is a phrase applied to Israel. 'Israel is my son, my first born', says God through Moses to Pharaoh. It has the Israel reference, but it also has the Davidic reference. In Psalm 2, a passage which Paul and the early Christians went back to again and again, God says to the king, 'You are my son. This day have I begotten you. Ask of me and I will give you the nations as your inheritance.' Paul draws on precisely that theme to present Jesus as the Son of God, representative of Israel, and the true Davidic King.

It's much more than that, though. We see in Romans 8, Galatians 4, and in several other passages, that the phrase 'Son of God', while not losing those Jewish and messianic overtones, also contains the powerful meaning that Jesus somehow embodies the living presence of Godself.

Paul doesn't develop this in the way that the 3rd through 5th century writers did, in terms of the persons of the Trinity and so on. But already, Paul sees that 'Son of God' is a phrase he can use to say both that Jesus fulfils the biblical aspirations, and that he does so because he is the one sent from God who embodies Israel's returning God in himself. The language of Father and Son is already being developed in Paul in order to make that point.

After all, for Paul in Romans 5, 'we were reconciled to God by the death of his son'. In other words, Jesus doesn't just become Son of God at his resurrection. He's sent into the world as the Son of God to die on behalf of sinners.

Paul says the Son of God 'was descended from the seed of David in terms of flesh... marked out powerfully as God's son in terms of the spirit of holiness'. The fact that Jesus is 'from David's seed according to the flesh' is here evoking a passage from 2 Samuel 7. There, God makes this extraordinary promise to David, who wants to build God a house. God sends David a prophet who says 'actually, you're not going to build me a house, but when you're dead I will raise up your seed after you to sit on your throne. I will be his father. He will be my son. And he will build me a house.'

One of the fascinating things about the way the early Christians appropriated the Old Testament is that, as far as I know, nobody before early Christianity took that promise about David in terms of resurrection. Nobody thought 'I will raise up your seed after you' literally meant resurrection. Why would they? It normally just means 'I will establish this person'. When the early Christians were faced with the resurrection of the one who had been crucified as a would-be messiah,

they went back to texts like that and found in the Greek translation the phrase which could be read as 'I will resurrect your seed'.

Well there you have it. It all fits together. Resurrection demonstrates fulfilment of the messianic promises, the language of father and son. It comes rushing together in this dense packet of meaning in which we get Messiahship, Temple, Son of God, Incarnation. Paul says, Yes, and it's all true of Jesus. As with all of Romans, Paul is taking the foundational understanding of Israel's scriptural tradition, from first creation, through the promises and covenants, through the exile and the anticipation of the Messiah, and showing how it all points to Jesus. What God has done in Jesus – Sonship, Incarnation, Crucifixion, Resurrection – was surprising, but not unannounced. It was there all along for those who had ears to hear.

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About the Author

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