

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE ASPECTS OF PAULINE SOTERIOLOGY IN ROMANS 3

Gary W. Burnett

Introduction

The paper investigates how much Paul was concerned with matters of individual salvation, with reference to Romans chapter 3. The trend in recent years in New Testament scholarship has been to use insights from social science disciplines like sociology and anthropology to give help illuminate the New Testament texts. As a result of this, Paul's work has been re-interpreted in ways that pay much more attention to collective matters of group identity and behaviour and which tend either to ignore or discount interpretations that focus on individual and personal applications of his letters. Social science approaches and methodologies have often meant that the nature of the self in Paul's first century world is viewed as being radically different from the modern self and seen more as determined by the collective of which it is a part. From this perspective, religion and culture are viewed as being determinative forces moulding the shape of the self. With such strong presuppositions underlying many recent and current approaches to the New Testament, it can be difficult to detect the personal, psychological and interior elements in Pauline thought that previous scholarship so readily identified.

It is my contention that, while approaches borrowed from the social sciences have been useful to New Testament scholars and have, rightly, focused attention on the original social context in which the texts were produced and to which they were addressed, nevertheless the social sciences have a built-in disciplinary bias towards the collective. There is here, of necessity, the need to elevate the social over the individual.¹ This very fact sounds a note of warning when using sociological approaches to the New

¹ See the important criticism of the inherent bias in the social sciences by anthropologist A P Cohen, *An Alternative Anthropology of Identity*, (London, Routledge, 1994)

Burnett, **Romans 3** *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

Testament. In addition, if we examine carefully the nature of the self in the ancient world, along with the political, religious and urban development of the Hellenistic world, it is possible – desirable, I would contend, given the evidence.² – to view the first century person as much more self-aware, pro-active in the world, and making sense of the culture and world around and contributing to the continual cultural change of their era, than many recent New Testament studies allow.³ In other words, these people were individuals in much the same sense as we understand today – with all the emotional, psychological, individual needs that human beings as we know them have.

If this is indeed the nature of the first century self, then it is imperative that we be much more aware of the individual with her personal, interior, soteriological needs when we examine and seek to understand the New Testament texts.

In Romans 3, then, I examine Paul's talk about faith and find this to have an a priori individual application. I discuss the way in which some writers have highlighted the social function of faith for Israel and the Pauline communities and suggest that such approaches do not do full justice to Paul's understanding of how faith operates. I suggest that although Paul is concerned with the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the church and does think in covenantal ways, the logic of his argument in the early chapters of Romans indicates the importance to him of personal soteriology.

Collective and Individual Ideas in Paul

The issue of the relationship between an individual and God which scholars in the past have found in Romans has been largely superseded by a consensus that in Romans Paul was exploring the question that was of such vital importance for the early Christian

² I have examined such evidence in some detail in my unsubmitted PhD thesis. Unfortunately it will not be possible to present this in this paper

³ I have conducted a study of recent cross cultural anthropological studies and the evidence from modern neuroscience which presents human beings, from whatever age and culture as individual, culture-processing, active agents.

movement - that of the collective identity of the people of God within the unfolding of God's purposes. With few exceptions over the past twenty years, recent scholarship has moved away from seeing Romans as a systematic outline of Pauline theology primarily concerned with explaining how the individual gains salvation and maintains her relationship with God. Romans has largely come to be viewed as a presentation of Pauline theology in such a way as to further Paul's own personal plans and mission and to address tensions within the church at Rome. Given that these tensions primarily revolve around the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and Paul's missionary concerns are predicated on the Gentiles participating in the covenant community without being or becoming Jewish, it is not surprising that the Pauline soteriology in Romans is largely an explanation of how through Christ God's purposes are developing in such a way as to encompass both groups of people. There is little overall agreement amongst scholars on whether Paul is addressing mainly Gentiles, mainly Jews or a mixed Gentile-Jewish church, what the precise sociological situation was in Rome to which the letter is addressed, or on some of the issues of soteriology which Paul raises in the letter such as justification or righteousness, or indeed, on precisely how we are to understand Paul's talk about the Law, but there is no doubt that the focus is very much in understanding these things against a background of Pauline thought that is more concerned with collective rather than individual issues.

This, of course, is in stark contrast to earlier commentators who followed Luther in seeing in Romans essentially an exposition of the plight of human beings (caught in sin and unable to help themselves through their own efforts) and the means of salvation for an individual (justification through faith).⁴ Commenting on Rom. 1:16, on the gospel as the power of God to "everyone who believes", Käsemann refers to salvation as a person's experience of

⁴ Typical of a very individual, personal interpretation of Romans are commentaries by K Barth *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. E.C. Hoskyns, (London, Oxford, 1963); A Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. C.C. Rasmussen, (London, SCM, 1952); E Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, (London, SCM, 1980)

Burnett, **Romans 3** IBS 20 Oct 1998

peace and joy before God and assurance of future deliverance, and says that “the reference to “every” believer shows that the interpretation by early history-of-religions research that Paul never has the individual in mind is wrong. Universalism and *the most radical individuation* are here two sides of the same coin”.⁵ (my italics)

Should the recent realisation, then, that the overall concerns of Paul in his letter to the Romans are mainly corporate, lead us to dismiss any reading of Romans that gives room to more individual issues? As we have already seen, some biblical scholars want to deny any potential for more individual meanings in the New Testament texts, so convinced are they of the collective or even anti-individualistic nature of first century Graeco-Roman society. With a viewpoint similar to that of Martin or Malina who deny the existence of the autonomous self in the world of the first century,⁶ there can be no room for allowing Paul’s audience at Rome a sense of individual, psychological salvation needs which his gospel addressed or for any real explanation by Paul of how any one individual fits into God’s plans and how that individual experiences God’s salvation. With religion playing only a collective, social role, the emphasis is very much on social inclusion of the individual who has no real psychological awareness apart from the identity which membership of his group confers.

Yet, if we take seriously a recent critique by social anthropologist A. P. Cohen, of modern anthropological approaches to the self and culture which deny individual creativity, self-reflection and pro-activity in pre-modern cultures, and his assertion that for all societies, at all times, “the self has primacy”,⁷ then the individual

⁵ E Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 22

⁶ L H Martin, “The Anti-Individualistic Ideology of Hellenistic Culture”, *Numen*, 41, 1994, Brill, Leiden, 117-140; B.J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, (London, SCM, 1983); B.J.Malina & J.H.Neyrey, “Honour and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World.” in J.H. Neyrey, *The World of Luke-Acts. Models for Interpretation*, (Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson, 1991), 25-65

⁷ By this he means that people are first and foremost self-conscious individuals who make their own worlds through their acts of perception and interpretation, with the external world being filtered by the self.

thinking self which is the essence of humanness must be taken into consideration when reading the Pauline texts. To focus solely on the collective issues (that are undoubtedly there) in Paul is both to deny the self-conscious self in Paul and his readers and to miss some of the meaning in the texts. As a normal man of his time - i.e. as a self-conscious, creative individual continually relating to other such individuals – it is my contention that Paul must have been aware of the individual religious implications of his faith and that in Romans, where, for a variety of reasons, he gives his most thorough exposition of the gospel as he understands it, we should be able to detect some sense of individual salvific concerns. Paul's world, of course, must be described as much more collective than our own modern Western society. His world displayed little of modern individualism. Yet selfhood and individuality were just as important human characteristics then as now, and, given the way that I believe that this is attested to in classical and Hellenistic Greek literature and in the tradition of Greek philosophy, it would be surprising if Paul's writings did not give evidence of such characteristics.⁸ Paul, was, after all a successful missionary to the Gentiles in the Greek cities of the Mediterranean world, and as such must have been able to express his gospel in a way that appealed to the needs of his listeners. Such needs, given the sense of self and individuality that I argue was there, must have included individual, psychological, religious needs.

In addition, a review of the evidence for the rise in individuality and individual enterprise in the social setting of the cities of the Hellenistic world in which Paul worked, serves to highlight the search for individual redemption and salvation from external,

⁸ E.g. H.Lloyd Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, (Berkeley, London, University of Cal. Press, 1971), 158; B.Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1993); C. Pelling, *Characterisation and Individuality in Greek Literature*; M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, (Cambridge, CUP, 1986), chap. 7; C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard Univ. Press, 1989) 115-126; C. Gill in C.Gill (ed.) *The Person and the Human Mind: Issues in Ancient and Modern Philosophy*, Introduction; T. Engberg-Pedersen, "Stoic Philosophy and the Concept of the Person"; T H Irwin, *Aristotles' First Principles*; C. Stough, "Stoic Determination and Moral Responsibility", in J.M. Rist (ed.), *The Stoics*, (Los Angeles, 1978), 203-231

Burnett, **Romans 3** IBS 20 Oct 1998

deterministic powers in the religious and philosophical approaches that developed in the period.⁹ This would tend to suggest that it would not be unlikely to find important individual aspects in the Pauline gospel.

Of course, the scholarly consensus of recent years is that Paul's thoroughly Jewish pedigree and worldview, moulded by his Pharisaic upbringing, remained formative and definitive for the shaping of his theology, his mission and his practise throughout his life and is the vital cultural backdrop against which to read Paul's letters. It is Paul's Jewish worldview, then, that is definitive for the formation of his theology. But did Paul's Jewish background produce any more of a collective outlook in his letters than if he had come from a non-Jewish background? Again, recent anthropological research regarding the "primacy of the self" stills holds, even for someone from a cultural background that stressed collective values and where collective identity was of very great importance. Within such a cultural framework, individuals still operated as creative agents with ambitions, needs, desires and religious aspirations which they sought to fulfil.¹⁰ This is supported by Hengel's research on the Hellenisation of Judaism in our period, and his view that Jews shared with Greeks a sense of the religious individual and of individual eschatological salvation, as well as by Davies' judgement that there was a heightened sense of individual religious experience and piety in second Temple Judaism.¹¹ According to Hengel,

"One fundamental feature which Jews and Greeks in the Hellenistic period had in common is the discovery of the religious individual and

⁹ Again, the constraints of this paper do not permit a full detailing of what is an extensive body of evidence for this.

¹⁰ I have reviewed several cross-cultural studies which examine collective and individualist cultures, and found that, even in what can be termed collective cultures, individual thinking and action must still be recognised. E.g. H.C. Triandis, "Cross-Cultural Studies of Individualism and Collectivism" in J.J. Berman (ed.), *Cross-Cultural Perspectives, Nebraska Symposium on Motivation*, 1989, (Lincoln & London, University of Nebraska Press, 1990)

¹¹ M Hengel, *The 'Hellenisation' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, (London, SCM, 1989), 48, 50; W.D.Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism*, (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1991), 52

the individual's eschatological salvation disclosed quite personally through 'conversion'".¹²

There is nothing in Paul's Jewish background, then, that would have precluded him having a concern for the individual self in his understanding of matters pertaining to salvation.

On the contrary, an investigation into the anthropology of the ancient self, the process of Hellenisation, the development of religion in the Hellenistic period, and Second Temple Judaism, will point to the likelihood that Paul must have been concerned with the individual and her religious needs, and that his letter should be read in a way that gives full recognition to this, albeit within a framework of more collective ways of thinking.

The likelihood, then, given all the factors we have considered to date, is that we might find in Paul a more balanced theology of individual and the community, where there is a concern for an individual's relationship with God within an overarching community narrative and view of the purpose of God which primarily concerned the people of God.

Romans 3: 21 -23

Introduction and Context

From chapter 1: 18 through to the end of chapter three, Paul explores aspects of the argument he began in verses sixteen and seventeen of chapter one. Here he stated the possibility of salvation for Gentiles as well as Jews through the power of God at work in the gospel of Jesus Christ, made effective for everyone, irrespective of ethnic background, through faith. In the last section of chapter one, and in chapters two and three, Paul discusses the universal need of both Gentiles and Jews of salvation because of sin and the universal inability to be obedient to God (3: 9-18; 23). This marks the first, necessary stage in his argument – a statement of universal

¹² M Hengel, *The 'Hellenisation' of Judaea in the First Century after Christ*, 48

Burnett, Romans 3 *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

solidarity in the circumstances which make God's righteousness and salvation necessary. He establishes for his readership clearly, then, that there is a universal need of salvation. His contention, of course is that there is but one means of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike – through God's action in Christ. This is fundamental to Paul's understanding of the gospel – that the righteous, saving, faithful God of Israel has acted decisively through Christ to bring salvation, and is quite explicit in Paul's statements in 1: 1-5; 16,17; 3: 21-26. What Paul now wants to establish in his argument is that there is one means of access to this salvation – through faith. Clearly if God is One, and the creator and God of all humankind, then his salvation cannot be restricted to one small part of the human race – the Jews. This being the case, then the means of salvation cannot revolve around allegiance to a very specific code which relates to one ethnic group. The Jewish Torah, then, it is Paul's contention, cannot be the means of experiencing God's salvation and participating in the righteous people of God. That faith, and specifically faith in Jesus Christ, is the grounds for justification – i.e. being counted as part of the righteous people of God – has already been mentioned by Paul but he now goes on to explore it in more detail and to cement his argument, particularly as his discourse continues in chapter 4.

Paul is here very much concerned with the issue at stake in the Christian communities of his day – the relation between Jews and Gentiles and the grounds for participation in the people of God. Observance of specifically Jewish Torah practice would restrict such participation to members of Israel by birth, or to those Gentiles willing to become Jewish proselytes. The gospel, according to Paul, however, had a much wider appeal, and Paul maintained that faith, as opposed to Law-observance was the key identifying mark of the people of God. Those who would be vindicated by God in the last day, then, were those who were marked by faith in Jesus Christ, rather than those who kept the Jewish Law. Justification by faith, then, as opposed to justification

by works (of the Law).¹³ Who the people of God are, and the grounds for such collective identification are the major issues that Paul is dealing with in the discussion we have in Romans, which served partly to set out his understanding of the gospel for the sake of a congregation he had not yet met, and whose help he wanted to enlist for his future missionary plans.

The individual aspect of all this, however, and the necessary personal application, I believe, were never far away from Paul's mind. Faith may have been for Paul an identifying characteristic of the new people of God, but the notion of faith itself, I would contend, carries with it deeply personal overtones in its Jewish background.

Faith in The Old Testament and Judaism

When we begin to examine the meaning of faith in Hebrew tradition, there is evidence to suggest that it operates primarily at a personal and individual level. Faith might be said to be a defining characterise of God's people and thus to carry with it an important sense of collective identity, but it is important that we do not minimise the importance of faith for the individual in the Hebrew scriptures.

In the Hebrew scriptures, Israel's God is the one who is faithful, loyal and trustworthy and who demands in return a response of faithfulness and trust by his people in his action on their behalf. This is very much the theme of, in particular, the Deuteronomic literature in the Old testament. Covenantal theology, with its emphasis on the indisputable faithfulness of God and the required response of loyalty from those to whom he had committed himself, lies at the heart of most of the Hebrew scriptures.¹⁴ In such a setting, faith was the ideal response to God's prior calling and grace, consisting of trust and confidence in God and grateful

¹³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 334 - 338

¹⁴ D. Cohn-Sherbok and S. Bigger, "Covenant and Law", in S. Bigger (ed.), *Creating the Old Testament: The Emergence of the Hebrew Bible*, (Oxford, Blackwell, 1989), 135 - 148.

Burnett, **Romans 3** *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

obedience to God's requirements¹⁵ - "faith in the Hebrew Bible is two sided: trust and a commitment (to the covenant) resultant from trust".¹⁶

Faith in Jewish tradition can be said to be a characteristic of God's own people, engendered by God's prior grace and faithful love. N.T. Wright, in discussing the Jewish conception of faith, points to a number of Hebrew scriptures - Isa.7:9 / Isa. 28:16 / Isa.30:15 / Hab. 2:4 - to make the point that in the last analysis, in the great day of judgement, the people of Yahweh will be marked out by their faith - "faith is not a religious virtue or attribute. Rather it is a distinguishing mark of the true people of Yahweh".¹⁷ For Israel, faith in her God was critical to her self-definition at the moment of crisis.¹⁸ This is entirely tied up with the sense that Israel had of special calling by God, and it was the nation's relationship with Yahweh - the one, true, creator God - which essentially defined her. Hence a proper response to - i.e. faith in - that God was critical to what Israel actually was.

Hence Wright makes the observation that faith for Israel was not to be understood "simply in terms of religious interiority", and that our twentieth century question about the role of faith within religious experience was not a vital question for Jews within the world of first century Judaism.¹⁹ Faith concerned the nation's relationship to the creator God and defined it over against the other pagan nations whom Yahweh had not chosen to be his righteous people. Of necessity, then, it entailed a certain way of life which was perceived to be in accordance with Yahweh's requirements for the nation, and which served to distinguish it from other groups.

¹⁵ G.N. Davies, *Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1-4*, JSNT 39, (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1990), 173

¹⁶ D.B. Garlington, "The Obedience of Faith in the Letter to the Romans: Part I: The Meaning of *ὑπακοή πιστεως* (Rom 1:5; 16:26)", *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990), 209

¹⁷ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996), 259

¹⁸ Wright quotes a number of post-biblical Jewish writings to illustrate this point: 1QpHab.2.1-7; 1 QpHab.7.17-8.3; 4Q521 II.2.1-9; Wis.3.9; T.Dan5.13; T.Dan 6.4; T.Ash.7.6-7 - Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 260, 261

¹⁹ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1996), 260,261

Faith, then, for Israel, can be said, in a sociological sense, to operate at a corporate level – and it is certainly true that our modern individualistic and intellectual sense of belief is not to the fore in the Hebrew scriptures.

A recognition of the sociological reality of faith within Israel, however – its rôle in establishing a collective identity as the people of Yahweh –should not distract us from seeing the necessary operation of faith at the level of the individual. Faith in the Hebrew tradition was also, arguably, an intensely personal experience on the part of the individual who needed rescue, salvation or refuge by his God.²⁰ This is very evident in the Psalms, which although used in corporate worship, deal at times with very personal issues and are expressed in very personal terms e.g. Psalms 42/46/51/63/84/96/102/3/116/118/121/ 139/145.²¹ Furthermore, the narratives of the patriarchs and the prophets of Israel, while they play their part in the overarching and unfolding story of the nation, portray for us individuals who made real, personal life choices on the basis of their beliefs, convictions and perceived relationship with Yahweh.

The Hebrew root for the faith group of words is **אמן** with the sense of “firmness” or “stability”. Used in the Hiph’il form of the verb, it is normally translated “believe” or “trust”, and is very often used with a **ב** or a **ל** i.e. to trust in. In such usage, there was an implied relationship, which was ultimately personal, and the phrase is often used to refer to an individual’s trust in God (Gen 15:6 / Exod.14:31 / Ps.78:22 / Gen 45:26 / Is.43:10). The two nouns **אמון** and **אמנה** which derive from this root give the sense of “firmness” or

²⁰ In my thesis, I have explored the fact that both the individual and the collective were important in Hebrew tradition, and that the interiority of religion and personal piety became increasingly important in the inter-testamental period.

²¹ R. Tomes, “The Psalms”, in S. Bigger (ed.), *Creating the Old Testament*, 251 – 268. Tomes comments upon Psalms categorised as “individual laments” or “individual songs of thanksgiving”, and suggests that, although treating the “I” in these Psalms as the personification of the community was once in vogue, it is much more likely to reflect genuine individual concerns. (260, 261)

Burnett, **Romans 3** IBS 20 Oct 1998

“faithfulness” and refer both to God or to the human response to God (Ps.25:5 / 26:3 / Dan 8:12 / 9:13 / Jer.7:28 / Hab.2:4).²²

The conception in the Hebrew scriptures of faith, then, seems to be a recognition of God as creator and the one, true God, a recognition that gives rise to a response of penitence, obedience and faithfulness to his will and requirements. It is not the acceptance of ideas or dogmas about God or a set of beliefs; it is rather a moral response springing from a person’s will, arising from a deep-seated trust and confidence in God. Of absolute necessity, this works first and foremost on the level of the individual Israelite who had the opportunity to make his or her own response of loyalty to Yahweh. The Hebrew bible’s narratives admittedly tell the collective story of the nation, and in an important sense the individuals whose stories make up these narratives can be said to be representative of the nation. The stories of these individuals, however, highlight very often for us individual choices for good or evil, choices to obey or disobey God, and examples of very personal faith. Israel’s story is thus composed of the story of individuals who had the opportunity to exercise faith in Israel’s God or not.

In the post-exilic period, faith seems increasingly to have been expressed through faithfulness to the Law – e.g. those who are noted as the “faithful” in both Daniel and Judith are the Law-observing (Dan 1:8 / 6:10; Jth.8:5-6 / 11:17). As we move towards the first century CE, loyalty to the Hebrew traditions and observance of the Law became an intrinsic part of what faith in God meant.²³ In a situation of occupation in Palestine, and of

²² E.C. Blackman, “Faith, Faithfulness”, *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible*, 2.222-34; Brown, Driver, Briggs, (Transl. E Robinson), *Hebrew & English Lexicon*, (Peabody, Hendrickson, 1979), 52, 53

²³ G.F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Century of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, 3 vols (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1927-30) 2.238. Moore comments of the first century AD – “fidelity to God was in Jewish thought inseparable from confidence in God”. J. Pathrapankal, *Metanoia, Faith, Covenant: A study in Pauline Soteriology* (Bangalore, Dharmaram College, 1971), 77. “The obligation of the people to have faith in Yahweh was precisely an undertaking to remain faithful to the covenant”. This is in contrast to D. Lührmann, “Pistis im Judentum”, *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 64: 19-38, 26f, who sees “fidelity” as a virtue, which has to do with moralism.

living amongst Gentiles in the Diaspora, Jewish identity became increasingly important, and the practise of the Law, especially with respect to circumcision, diet and festivals²⁴ was essential in creating the boundary markers which separated Jew from Gentile and created a Jewish identity. Faith in God and faithfulness to God meant essentially being faithful to the demands of the Law which Israel's God had graciously given. Law keeping, then, was the way in which a Jew could express his faith in the God of his fathers and confirmed his place, like faithful Abraham, within the bounds of the righteous community. As Sanders has demonstrated, such Law-keeping did not imply some sort of attempt to gain God's favour – to a Jew, it was simply clearly the way in which faith in the One true God was to be expressed.²⁵

Overall, then, the sense which emerges from the Hebrew scriptures and inter-testamental literature of faith is the idea of trust and confidence in God, Israel's saviour, expressed by faithful adherence to their God's requirements – which were enshrined in the demands of the Jewish Law. Faith was something very much bound up with the Jewish idea of covenant and was the totality of response of a grateful people to a faithful, loving creator God who had chosen them. Such a response encompassed fidelity in worship, confidence in the outworking of his plans for his people in the future, and obedience to his revealed will. The corporate flavour given to faith by Wright²⁶ (noted earlier) is only one aspect of how we must understand it operating in Israel's history. It may be *observed* to mark out the people of God, particularly at time of crisis, as Wright has pointed out for us, and thus serve as a corporate identity, but faith, by its very nature and definition, has an important individual dimension. Response to God by a people operates first and foremost at an individual level – trust and confidence are mental, cognitive processes that originate in individual brains - and faithful obedience is carried out by individuals as deliberate, wilful action.

²⁴ J.G.D. Dunn, *Romans 1 – 8*, lxxi

²⁵ E.P.Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, (London, SCM, 1997)

²⁶ It should, of course, be noted, that it is clear from much of Wright's work that such a corporate definition of faith represents only one side of his understanding of Israel's faith.

Burnett, **Romans 3** IBS 20 Oct 1998

There are doubtless social influences at work within a group of people related by kinship, history and nationality – but a convincing case can be made that these do not determine, they merely interact with pro-active individual agents whose combined actions may be observed to follow a similar pattern.²⁷ The covenantal idea of faith, then, while it may be observed at a collective level, and must not be thought of in a modern sense as a highly intellectualised set of personal beliefs, nevertheless does operate in a very individual sense. The calling of God in the lives of individuals from the patriarchs to the prophets, and the expressions of faith in the Psalms all witness to the personal aspect of faith which was part of Israel's heritage. This, of course, was part of the inheritance of Paul the ex-Pharisee.

The Meaning of Faith For Paul

A covenantal understanding of faith was essential to Paul's sense of the idea. As a Jew and ex-Pharisee, as we have seen, the covenant informed his world-view and his conception of faith was rooted in the Hebrew scriptures. As Garlington points out, we never find Paul debating the meaning of faith with his opponents; he simply assumes the concept of his tradition.²⁸ And yet, it is likely that Paul's experience of Christ and his understanding of the significance of the Christ-event led him to alter the way in which he understood faith to work in the life of the believer.²⁹ This new understanding left no role for the Jewish Law as part of a person's faithful response to God,³⁰ and was, thus, the cause of controversy

²⁷ I deal with this issue at some length in my PhD thesis

²⁸ D.B. Garlington, "The Obedience of Faith in the Letter to the Romans", 210

²⁹ To quote Garlington again, "What is radical about Paul, however, is *faith's object* – Christ", 211. A.F. Segal, *Paul the Convert: the Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990), 128f. points out that "no other Jews in the first century distinguish faith and law in the way Paul does". Rather faith and law-observance were intimately entwined in Judaism. Paul, significantly, sets the two in opposition. Faith previously for Paul meant faithful Torah observance, but Paul's experience of God's grace manifest to the Gentiles led him to a new model of the righteous community which focused, as before, on faith, but now left aside the Jewish Law as a necessary defining element. Faith then continued to be an essential element of the proper response to God for Paul, but it could no longer be thought of as being outworked through Law-obedience.

³⁰ In Galatians 3, Paul contrasts the "works of the Law" with faith (v. 5) and baldly states

with Jews and other Jewish Christians. So Paul's understanding of faith was at once traditional, and yet new – it is this that we shall explore as we examine the text of Romans 3: 21-23. Paul writes against a background of covenantal theology, exploring the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the purposes of God, yet at the same time, his concerns are soteriological – his understanding of the inadequacy of the Law as an expression of faith has led him to reach fundamental conclusions about the human condition in general, which are only addressed by what God has done through Christ and applied to an individual through faith. For Paul, then, the collective issues involved can in no way be divorced from the relevance of God's righteousness to the individual.

Romans 3 - Background

In verse 9 of chapter three, Paul reiterates the point that he has been at pains to make from 1:18 to this point – “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin” – irrespective of racial background, everyone is a “sinner”.

that “the Law is not of faith” in v. 12. The whole thrust of his argument in this chapter in Galatians is to make very clear the temporary nature of the Law, and that faith's focus now must be in Christ, as opposed to Torah (vv. 23 – 25). The Law, according to Paul, cannot give life – only faith in Christ can do this (v21). Romans 3 carries much of the same Law – faith antithesis. God's faithful action to his people is now revealed through “faith in Jesus Christ”, “apart from the Law” (vv. 21, 22). Some authors feel the matter of the role of Torah for the believer in Paul's thinking is not so clear cut – e.g H Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1986); L. Gaston, *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1987); J.G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes towards Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). Most scholars, no matter how exactly they interpret the nature of Paul's opposition to the Law, recognise that he was opposed to it as the arena in which faith operated any more for the righteous. So, for example, D. L. Barlett, *Romans*, 40, referring to “a right relationship with God”, declares that it is Paul's view that “Torah can't do it”. J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1 – 8*, 165 refers to Romans 3: 21 as describing the “eschatological turning point of history”. J.A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 343ff. highlights the “period of humanity under the law” with the eschaton which began with Christ and his mission, in his discussion of Romans 3:21 ff. D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 218 – “faith was both the necessary and necessarily exclusive response of human beings to God's work of redemption”. J. Ziesler, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, 44 – “the Law plays no part in justification, in becoming acceptable to God as part of his people”. So also older commentaries by Cranfield, Dodd, Käsemann and Nygren.

The question of who is to be counted amongst the “sinners” and who is amongst the “righteous” of a matter of great importance to the various sectarian groups within Second Temple Judaism, as many scholars have recently argued.³¹ Typically, those who adhered to the sect’s behavioural requirements and stayed within the social and moral boundary markers associated with the group were judged to be the true Israel, the righteous ones, those with “covenant status”. Those who did not fit into this group – either Gentiles (necessarily)³² or other Jews, were considered to be sinners.³³ Only by coming within the boundaries of the righteous group by virtue of faithful adherence to the sect’s requirements – this group’s understanding of Torah – could a sinner become righteous. Faith, in the sense of faithfulness, was a requirement of righteousness. And, correspondingly, lack of faith put one firmly in the camp of the “sinners”.

Paul, in seeking to give the extended explanation of his gospel which we have in Romans, starts by defining the category of “sinner”. In the latter half of chapter one, he shows clearly how the Gentiles have failed to meet God’s (and the Law’s) moral requirements and as a race, have no hope of being considered part of God’s righteous people. Such a viewpoint would have been common for a Jew of this time, no matter which variety of Judaism

³¹ E.g. N.T. Wright, “Putting Paul Together Again”, in J.M. Bassler, (ed.), *Pauline Theology, Volume 1: Thesalonians, Philippians, Galatians, Philemon*, (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1991), 202

³² For a note on Jewish nationalistic distinctiveness, see B. Longenecker, *Eschatology and the Covenant: A Comparison of 4 Ezra and Romans 1-11*, (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1991), 27-31

³³ J.D.G. Dunn, “Pharisees, Sinners and Jesus”, in *Jesus, Paul and the Law*, (London, SPCK, 1990), 61-88. Dunn represents the Pharisees as a sect which exhibited a special zeal for the Law and to whom those other Jews with different ideas about what constituted covenant loyalty would have been thought of as “sinners”. He notes other such Jewish polemic in 1 Maccabees 1:34; 2:44,48 where apostate Jews are referred to as “sinners and lawless men”; in Jubilees 6:32-5; 23:16, 26 where disagreement about the Jewish calendar put opponents in the same category as Gentile sinners; in 1 Enoch 1-5, where again a calendrical factional dispute condemns those Jews who practised their Judaism differently; in the Dead Sea Scrolls (e.g. CD1.13-21; 1QS 2.4-5; 1QH 2.8-19; 1QpHab2.1-4; 5.3-8) where non-Essene (Jewish) opponents are denounced as transgressors; and in the Psalms of Solomon, where Hasmonean Sadducees who are the opponents of the devout are designated “sinners”.

he belonged to.³⁴ In chapter two, though, Paul goes on to put the entire race of Jews in precisely the same category! His argument is that, although the Jews have been privileged with God's Law, they have not been obedient to it. *Having* the Law, Paul insists, is no guarantee of covenant status – only *doing* it counts in the end. He accuses his fellow countrymen of behaving in just the same way as the Gentiles – chapter 2: 3 / 9 / 21,22. God, he says, is not interested in who *has* the Law – but rather in who keeps its precepts, whether they be those privileged to have been given it or not (2: 11-16). Paul's view clearly is that the Jews as a race have not kept the Law, and therefore fall into precisely the same category as the Gentiles – they are to be counted among the “sinners”. He makes this explicit in verse 9 of chapter three: – “we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin” – and goes on to back this claim up from a variety of quotations from the Psalms.

Paul's consideration of the question of who qualifies to be a member of the “righteous” (nobody!) thus leads him to the conclusion in verse 19 of chapter three, that all the world is “accountable to God” and that “there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (vv.22, 23). Paul's covenantal theology, then, which is concerned with the question of who participates in God's people, very soon becomes soteriological in its nature, as he comes face to face with the reality of the culpability of every human being before God, and thus their need of salvation.³⁵ Paul's reasoning about who's “in” and who's “out” goes much further than a discussion of “boundary markers” designated by the Jewish Law. To be sure, Paul does want to allow for the option of non-Jews being accepted into the ranks of the righteous, and so of necessity has to discount Torah as the definitive arbiter of covenant status, but his line of argument about

³⁴ e.g. Wisd. Sol 14: 25-25; 4 Macc. 1:26-27; 2 Enoch 10:4-5; 1QS 4:9-11; Philo *Sac.*32

³⁵ D Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity*, (Berkeley, Univ. of California Press, 1994), 293. Boyarin questions Wright's approach to Pauline theology, which he feels concentrates too much on covenantal theology, as opposed to soteriology. Boyarin suggests that “somehow the two elements of covenantal theology and individual salvation...have to be integrated”.

Burnett, **Romans 3** *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

the culpability of the two races, which puts Jews and Gentiles together “under sin”, is about “something far more fundamental in the human condition”.³⁶ That Paul spends so much time in Romans discussing the common condition of sinfulness of both Jews and Gentiles is surely indicative of this.

Both groups fall into the category of sinners. The Jews, despite their heritage and possession of their treasured Law, are no better off than the Gentiles. And the reason for this? Because, in Paul’s words, “all have sinned” – Jews have been unable to keep the Law and so, like the Gentiles are held culpable. Paul stresses the individual nature of this culpability – his whole discussion in chapter two is about the irrelevance of mere possession of the Law (i.e. any ethnic privilege) and the importance of individual behaviour. Thus Paul insists that God “will render to every person according to his deeds” (2: 6ff). The clear point is that sinning is done by individuals. (The list of Gentile sins in 1: 29-31 and Jewish shortcomings in 2: 21-22 include both actions which are mental in nature and thus clearly personal and actions committed by individuals as the result of individual choice).

Once Paul creates a level playing, with both groups condemned as sinners, individual salvation begins to take on major importance. Because ethnic considerations have no bearing on the matter, and each individual on his own behalf is able to participate (or not) within the group of the righteous (through God’s grace and faith), the spotlight falls on the individual and his or her own response to God. A focus on individual salvation becomes a necessary corollary of Paul’s argument about covenant status.

Focus on 3: 21 – 23

21 But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.

³⁶ B. Longenecker, “Contours of Covenantal Theology in the Post-Conversion Paul”, in R.N. Longenecker (ed.), *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul’s Conversion on His Life, Thought and Ministry*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1997), 125-146, (143)

22 Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction:

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Having categorised the whole world, both Jews and Gentiles, as “sinners”, and thus outside the covenant people of God, Paul now begins to turn to matters soteriological. All are sinners – all are subject to the justly deserved wrath of God (2:2,5 / 3:5), and are under the power of sin (a theme which Paul will later develop in some detail in chapters 6 and 7). And all are in need of action by Israel’s Saviour-God, if any are to be justified, or vindicated. As we have discussed previously, although Paul lived in a less individualistic age than our own, and his ethnic community was quite collective in outlook, he nevertheless lived and worked in a Hellenistic world, I would argue, had a growing sense of the importance of the self and individuality, and where there was a felt need amongst people of salvation of the self from deterministic powers.³⁷ In such a cultural milieu, it is not hard to believe that Paul’s thinking (prompted by his covenantal theology) about who fitted into the category of “sinner”, where he came to view everyone as under bondage to sin, served to provide a profound insight into the basic human condition – individuals enslaved to sin, and subject to the judgement of God. Individuals, in short, who needed God’s salvation. How they could participate in this salvation – the righteousness of God – is made explicit by Paul in these verses. It clearly could not be through the practice of an exclusive ethnic code (v 21 “apart from the Law) – it is, rather, through something available to everyone – faith.

God’s salvific action was realised through the faithful action of Jesus Christ (v 22). πιστις Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ has been the subject of intense debate, and is often translated as “faith in Christ”.³⁸ Many

³⁷ E Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 165; F C Grant, *Roman Hellenism and the New Testament*, (Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1962), 51

³⁸ e.g. Luther, *Glossae* 3.22 (Wausg 56.36; LuthW25.31); Cranfield, *Romans*, 203; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 166; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 345; Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 94; Moo, *Romans*, 224-25

Burnett, **Romans 3** *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

scholars, however, prefer to take the phrase as a subjective genitive – “the faith or faithfulness of Christ”.³⁹ My own preference is for the latter, which highlights the faithful life of Christ as the focal point of God’s righteous action towards his creation. With this translation Christ’s life and work becomes the epitome of a faithful response to the covenant. Christ is the one who was able to respond to God in the perfectly faithful and loyal way which Israel failed to do. Israel’s failure to keep the covenant was a familiar theme in Jewish theology, and has been highlighted by Paul throughout Romans 2:17 – 3:20. Paul has examined both Jewish and Gentile behaviour and found it all failing to meet the covenant requirement of faithfulness to God (v23). Christ, however, lived up to the required standard, and was the one, perfect example of covenant faithfulness.

This follows the general thesis of N.T. Wright about the close association in Paul’s thinking between Israel and the Messiah, which he has explored in some detail.⁴⁰ Wright’s explanation of Pauline theology in Romans regards the covenant as the framework for Paul’s thinking and argument. According to Wright, it was Paul’s fundamental belief that,

“the creator god was also the covenant god, that the covenant with Israel was always intended as the

³⁹ e.g. B.Byrne, *Reckoning with Romans: A contemporary reading of Paul’s Gospel*, GNS 18 (Wilmington, Glazier, 1986), 79-80; R.B.Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1 – 4:11*, (Chico, Scholars Press, 1983); G.Howard, “On the Faith of Christ”, *HTR* 60 (1967), 459-465; L.T. Johnson, “Romans 3:21-26 and the Faith of Jesus”, *CBQ* 44 (1982), 77-90; B.Longenecker, “Defining the Faithful Character of the Covenant Community: Galatians 2.15-21 and Beyond.” in J.D.G.Dunn (ed), *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, (Tubingen, Mohr-Siebeck, 1996), 75-97. Moo and others, however, do not find their arguments compelling, on the grounds that πιστις in Paul usually does not mean “faithfulness”, and that Paul’s consistent use of πιστις in 3:21-4:25 is for the faith exercised by believers. The arguments are not conclusive on either side; it really depends on the interpretation given to the overall context of Paul’s argument in these verses.

⁴⁰ This is the central thesis in N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, where he discusses a number of Pauline passages to make the case that the story of Israel has come to its climax in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Messiah, that the covenant has been finally fulfilled, and that the people of God have been redefined in the person of Christ.

means of setting the entire cosmos to rights, and that this intention had now in principle come true in Jesus and was being implemented by the Spirit".⁴¹

Paul, the first century Jew and ex-Pharisee, shared a fundamentally Jewish world-view, which revolved around the concepts of God and the covenant.⁴² The full blessing of the covenant, which included Israel becoming the source of blessing to the Gentiles (cf. Isa. 42: 7-7 / 43: 10-21 / 44:8 / 49:6) and the beacon of divine glory (Isa. 49:3) could only be enjoyed when Israel responded properly to God's prior grace and calling.⁴³ It is Wright's view that in Paul's covenantal thinking, Jesus the Messiah became Israel's representative, and because of his perfect obedience, the conditions for covenant blessing were satisfied.⁴⁴ As Longenecker puts it, "in the faithful ministry of Jesus, Israel's commission has been fulfilled – salvation is now available to all people through the one who embodies the faithfulness expected of God's covenant people".⁴⁵

Paul, then, in verse 22 writes from a covenantal perspective which saw the covenant demands finally and completed fulfilled by the Messiah, Jesus, which meant that the covenant blessing of full salvation (God's righteousness) was now made manifest.⁴⁶ For Paul, to whom it is clear that there was only one person who

⁴¹ N.T.Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul" in D.M. Hays & E.E. Johnson (eds.), *Pauline Theology Vol. III: Romans*, (Minneapolis, Fortress, 1995), 66

⁴² N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 243

⁴³ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 268-279. Here Wright traces to many early Judaic sources the idea that the eschatological dawn of a golden age of God's rule on earth would be brought about by a proper fulfilment of the covenant between God and Israel.

⁴⁴ N.T.Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul", 34. "the creator/covenant god has brought his covenant purpose for Israel to fruition in *Israel's representative, the Messiah, Jesus*" (emphasis Wright's)

⁴⁵ B. Longenecker, "Contours of Covenantal Theology in the Post-Conversion Paul", 134

⁴⁶ That Paul's thought was moulded by the covenant is not shared by all scholars – Martyn, for example, believes that the gospel has no "linear pre-history", or no "salvific linearity prior to the advent of Christ", and suggests that "Paul...does not accept covenant as a term indicating a fundamental building block of...theology...this apostle is not a covenantal theologian". J.L.Martyn, "Events in Galatia: Modified Covenantal Nomism or God's Invasion of the Cosmos in the Singular Gospel: A Response to J.D.G. Dunn and B.R. Gaventa", in J.M. Bassler (ed), *Pauline Theology. Vol. I*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 176, 179

Burnett, **Romans 3** *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

fulfilled the covenant⁴⁷ – the Messiah, Jesus – it has also become evident that everyone else, whether from a Jewish or Gentile background, must of necessity be considered a sinner.⁴⁸ Only one person was himself righteous – the rest, therefore, Jew and Gentile alike, are to be considered amongst the unrighteous. “All have sinned”, says Paul in verse 23, “and come short of the glory of God”.

As far as Paul was concerned, the covenantal response of faith – absolute trust and confidence in God, resulting in faithful and loyal obedience to all God’s requirements – was only - could only have been, given the slavery of human beings to the power of sin (Rom. 6:6 – 8:11) - evident in one person. Therefore the means of a person being counted as part of the righteous people of God – being justified – could not have been through covenant faithfulness. This was only exhibited through Jesus. The only means of becoming one of the righteous was to participate in the righteousness of the One who had proved himself properly faithful to God.⁴⁹ And for Paul, the means of such participation was through faith,⁵⁰ in the sense of trust and confidence in the efficacy of this One’s own faithfulness. Thus, in Dunn’s words, Paul effectively “draws a wedge between the two senses of *pistis* (faith/faithfulness)”.⁵¹ Faith in Christ, in

⁴⁷ N.T. Wright, “Romans and the Theology of Paul”, 37. “there must...be an Israel that is faithful to the covenant, so that through this Israel the creator/covenant god can deal with the evil of the world, and with its consequences”

⁴⁸ B. Longenecker, “Contours of Covenantal Theology in the Post-Conversion Paul”, 139. “when the covenant boundaries are defined as exclusively encircling a single individual, the category applicable to all others is that of a covenant outsider, or “sinner””.

⁴⁹ Faith in Christ’s covenant faithfulness is also stressed by Paul in Galatians 2:16b –“we have put our faith in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by the covenant faithfulness of Christ”, and in Gal.3:22, where God’s promises are given to those that believe through the faithfulness of Christ.

⁵⁰ B.W. Longenecker, “Defining the Faithful Character of the Covenantal Community: Gal.2: 15-21 and Beyond”, in J.D.G.Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, (Tubingen, JCB Mohr (Siebeck), 1996), 75 - 97. Longenecker views faith in Paul to relate to participation in Christ. “To be in Christ is to have his (and only his) faithfulness as the mark of one’s own covenant fidelity”, 82, 83

⁵¹ J.D.G. Dunn, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, (London, A&C Black, 1993), 163. Dunn here is discussing Galatians 3:7, and the contrast between “those of faith” and “those of works of the law”. Believing and trusting are the characteristics of the faithful, as opposed to adherence to the Jewish Law.

the sense of utter confidence and trust, is now the means of participation in the covenant people of God, as opposed to faithfulness to the Law.⁵² “‘Faith’ consistently in Paul denotes unconditional trust in God alone”.⁵³ Covenant fidelity has now been redefined by Paul by centring on Christ’s faithfulness, and is appropriated and, indeed, replicated in their lives, by those who believe.⁵⁴

We see, then, that, on the one hand, Paul is thinking in a very covenantal way – his logic regarding justification focuses on the need for faithfulness to the God of the covenant. But his understanding about what Christ has done, in perfectly fulfilling the covenant and taking the place of Israel, and the inability of anyone else, either Jew or Gentile to met covenant demands, leads him to amend his understanding of covenant faith and the means of participation in the covenant, and indeed, his whole view about the scope of the covenant. So now, faith is nuanced to mean trust and confidence in the ability of Jesus the Messiah to have met the faithfulness-demands of the covenant perfectly. Participation in the covenant people of God is by means of such trust, as opposed to keeping the demands of the Law, and, as a result of this, the covenant can now be open to everyone, even if they are not Jewish.⁵⁵ The creator God is One – God of Jew and Gentile alike, and there are now no ethnic barriers to becoming a part of this

⁵² J.D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, 46. “for Paul the counterpart of God’s faithfulness is not man’s *faithfulness* (at any rate as understood within Judaism), but *faith*, his trust in and total reliance upon God.”

⁵³ J.D.G. Dunn, *Galatians*, 312

⁵⁴ B.W. Longenecker, “Defining the Faithful Character of the Covenantal Community”, 83, 84. “Rom 3:26...appears to mean that the faithfulness of Christ, through which God’s eschatological righteousness has broken into the world, is being replicated within the lives of those who believe, and only on that basis is a relationship of covenantal righteousness established”

⁵⁵ E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, 101. In his discussion of faith in this passage, Käsemann notes how Paul’s understanding of the divine covenant has been modified. “God’s righteousness reaches beyond the covenant people and is valid for everyone who believes in Jesus the Crucified. Indirectly this says that God’s covenant faithfulness becomes his faithfulness to his whole creation...The salvation history of the old covenant moves out into the broader dimension of world history.”

Burnett, **Romans 3** *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

God's righteous people. All that is required is trust in the efficacy of what Jesus has done.

Covenantal Theology Leads to Individual Soteriology

Once we see where the logic of Paul's argument takes him, soteriological and individual, personal issues begin to emerge as important. In passing, it is important to note the creativity of Paul's own thinking, that he is not a slave to his own culture. His culture and tradition form the backdrop to his thinking and are seminal influences for him, but he is free to think individually and creatively,⁵⁶ amending his culture in the light of his own experience of the living Christ at Damascus and of the Gentile world in which he lived and ministered.⁵⁷ He had come to experience Jesus Christ as a personal, living reality, and so his thinking about the covenant and how to and who could participate in it had changed. His work amongst pagans had brought him face to face with pagan sin and human bondage and the relevance of the gospel to individual lives must have become an issue for him.⁵⁸ As he considered all this, then, his covenantal thinking about God and his purposes was adapted, and began to reflect, amongst other things, personal and individual soteriological concerns.

I have already suggested that Paul's sense of universal participation in, indeed, slavery to, sin must have led him to think in broad anthropological terms as well as in covenantal terms. Once Christ is

⁵⁶ In my thesis, I have explored recent sociological and anthropological research regarding the relationship between an individual and culture and concluded that culture should not be seen as a predetermining element. E.g. W.H. Goodenough, *Culture, Language and Society*, 2nd edition, (Menlo Park, California, Benjamin Cummings, 1981)

⁵⁷ W.S. Campbell, "The Contribution of Traditions to Paul's Theology: A Response to C.J. Roetzel" in J.M. Bassler (ed.), *Pauline Theology Vol II*, (Minneapolis, Augsburg, 199x), 234-54, 254. Campbell refers to Paul creatively reformulating and transforming the inherited images and metaphors of his tradition.

⁵⁸ A study of the Hellenistic world reveals a newly emerging sense of individualism which undoubtedly Paul would have encountered and the development of psychological-religious needs which were characteristic of this uncertain and rapidly-changing age. This, and the encounter between Judaism and Hellenism which produced, as Hengel puts it, the "discovery of the individual before God" must have had its effect on the way in which Paul began to interpret his tradition.

seen as the only righteous one, everyone else is seen as outside the covenant, a sinner, (Jew as well as Gentile). There can be no place for faithfulness to the Law as the means of justification, and in any case, it is evident that Israel has never managed to fulfil her obligation of Torah faithfulness. Jews are in exactly the same boat as Gentiles (Rom 2), who are plainly slaves to sin and unrighteous (Rom 1:18-32). So now Paul has the whole mass of humanity without distinction (3:22) in need of salvation. This universal problem, must of necessity be an individual problem. Once Paul moves in his thinking to these universal categories, where there is no Jew or Greek or any other distinction (Gal.3:28), then the gospel takes on a clear individual appeal, for it is individual selves who can now choose to respond to God's action in Christ and to become part of the new people of God, the righteous. God's action in Christ may have been seen and interpreted by Paul against the backdrop of the covenant, but, of necessity, the universal aspects of the gospel force us to recognise the important soteriological concerns that impel Paul's writing. Paul is doubtless concerned with covenantal questions about the make-up of the people of God, but his insights into the universal sin-slavery of humankind, and about salvation through faith, aside from any ethnic requirements, indicate a serious concern by Paul with individual soteriology. Everyone is in need of salvation, anyone can be saved, and therefore the imperative is that each individual should respond to Christ and become part of the new community of faith.

Faith, however, has now been removed from an ethnic or strictly community setting – in the sense that it does not depend on the operation of any pre-defined national, gender-based, or sociological grouping – and can be exercised by any person, from whatever social grouping. This of necessity throws the spotlight on the individual and her personal response. Faith has become dependent upon some personal decisions of the believer – the decision to believe the gospel message about God's action in Christ, the decision to join the new community of faith, the decision to adopt certain appropriate lifestyle modes of behaviour, for example – and upon certain inner, personal attitudes. These include the adoption of

Burnett, **Romans 3** IBS 20 Oct 1998

a new belief system, and trust and confidence in Christ's action on the believer's behalf. All these fall first and foremost into the category of the cognitive and emotional – and therefore, of necessity, of the personal and individual.⁵⁹

The major issue within the emerging Christian movement in Paul's day was that of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the people of God. The fact that Paul in his Roman letter was clearly concerned with this macro group-oriented issue, and brings his letter to a climax in chapters 9-11 in his attempt to counter Roman Gentile superiority, should not make us blind to the fact that his gospel, as he explains it, has, and has of necessity, a very individual appeal and application. Sin, slavery to sin and exercising faith in order to participate in the righteous community all operate on the level of the individual self. The track down which Paul has come in his thinking, albeit prompted by his covenantal theology,⁶⁰ nevertheless leads him to contemplate anthropological issues such as the plight of unredeemed humanity and the need for individual salvation. These are key elements in a Pauline gospel which, although springing from a Jewish covenantal background, now addresses more generalised issues – those of humanity without God and of the need for salvation. Nor are these side issues for Paul⁶¹ – his experience of the world beyond Judaism brought him face to face with the pain of individual lives in slavery to powers beyond

⁵⁹ This sense of faith in Paul is borne out by many writers: C.A.A. Scott, *Christianity According to St. Paul*, (Cambridge, CUP, 1932), 133, where faith is “a joyful self-committal of the whole personality to God”; J. Ziesler, *Romans*, 81, “faith is response and unconditional commitment to God and his Christ”; Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, “‘faith’ consistently in Paul denotes unconditional trust in God”; Rowland, *Christian Origins*, 139, “God’s reign...called for an individual response...obedience and dependence of faith”;

⁶⁰ E. Käsemann, “Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans”, in *Perspectives on Paul*, transl. M. Kohl (1969), (London, SCM, 1971), 65-68. Käsemann makes the point that “it cannot be seriously disputed that salvation history forms the horizon of Pauline theology, but that this salvation-history importantly involved individuals... the victory of Christ which is the culmination of salvation history, is worked out through individual believers who “bear their crosses and suffer as disciples””.

⁶¹ E. Käsemann, “Justification and Salvation History”, 73. Käsemann comments that the justification of the sinner “is the centre, not only of the Pauline message, but of the whole Christian proclamation”

their control, seeking freedom and self-mastery,⁶² and the gospel of redemption through Christ was highly relevant. It should be no surprise to us, then, to hear Paul emphasise these very individual issues in his explanation of his understanding of the gospel in Romans.

The fact that the covenant underpins Paul's theological reflection and what he has to say about faith should not deflect us from recognising the individual relevance of his theology. As Longenecker has pointed out, the "social and communal dimensions are not the sum total of covenantal theology".⁶³ In Pauline studies recently, the covenant has almost become a sociological phenomena, with its terminology playing a key role in the definition of social identity. Longenecker doubts, however, that covenant theology is simply about matters of social definition and suggests that Paul's theology has much greater depths than the issue of what group is and what group is not God's people. My contention is, that given the thrust of Paul's argument in Romans 1-3 which explores the common plight of all human beings, and the possibilities for inclusion for every individual amongst the ranks of the "righteous" through Christ's faithfulness, we must recognise Paul's argumentation to be not only covenantal in nature, but also soteriological – and individually soteriological. There is a covenantal basis for what Paul has to say, but the very nature of the universality of his gospel gives it an *a priori* individual emphasis.

Sociological Interpretations of Faith

The covenantal framework of Paul's understanding of faith has been prominent, as we have seen, in recent Pauline research, and the stress has often been on the collective meaning of faith as a defining element for the nation. I have sought to demonstrate the importance of seeing the fundamental individual nature of faith in both Jewish tradition and in Pauline thinking, and that Paul's

⁶² S.K. Stowers, *A Re-Reading of Romans: Justice, Jews & Gentiles*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1994)

⁶³ B.W. Longenecker, "Defining the Faithful Character of the Covenantal Community: 75, 76

covenant theology, refracted through the Christ-event, becomes importantly individualistic in its application. This is perhaps something that needs to be re-emphasised, when the influence of sociology in approaching Pauline texts is still strong. Often a focus in such approaches on the social function of faith within the Pauline communities and their immediate social setting produces an undue emphasis on the collective nature of faith, as opposed to the individual.⁶⁴

I contend, however, that socially-oriented understandings of faith fail to do justice to the primary, individual aspects of faith. Social approaches undoubtedly can give insights into the world in which Paul lived which are useful for interpretation, but they miss vital and intended meanings by forcing the social and collective to the exclusion of the personal. Recent scientific anthropological studies will not let us simply classify one society as completely collectivist, or one completely individualistic; furthermore, it is unlikely that the first century Mediterranean self was any different from modern selves in terms of active self-consciousness, intention, emotion, and inner psychological world. My exploration of the thrust of Paul's argument in Romans 1 – 3 and the verses in chapter three under consideration in this paper point directly to the relevance of faith to the individual needs of the first century Mediterranean self, and the cognitive, trust-focused sense of faith in Paul's argument in Romans. My reading of these early chapters of Romans highlights the anthropological concerns of Paul which go far beyond either covenantal boundary markers or the sociological context of the Roman Christian community (important as these are in our overall understanding of Romans, as I have admitted). This concern of Paul's with the fundamental sinful condition of all humanity, and the solution based on an individual participation by faith in Christ's perfect response to God, places an

⁶⁴ F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*; D.M. Bossman, "Paul's Mediterranean Gospel: Faith, Hope, Love", *Bib.Theol.Bull.* 25 (2), 1995, 71-78. These are both examples of attempts to show how faith operates in Paul sociologically: in Watson's case at the collective level of the rivalry between two sectarian communities; Bossman sees faith as a "group attribute" which serves to consolidate the cohesiveness of the group.

emphasis on the individual nature of faith. Indeed, my tracking of the logic of Paul's discussion in chapter three, where faith takes on a meaning very different than "faithfulness to the Jewish law", illustrates the radically individual nature of faith.

Paul's concern with individual salvation was as great as our own, and his meaning when he spoke of faith had a distinct and primary operation at the individual, inner and psychological level.

Conclusion

A reductionist sociological interpretation of faith will not do; nor will a covenantal understanding which becomes purely sociological in outlook, focusing primarily on matters of collective identity. As we examine the context in which Paul speaks of faith in Romans 3, which is his exposition of the solidarity of both Jews and Gentiles in slavery to sin, the impartiality of God and the possibility of being counted amongst the righteous due to the demonstration of the righteousness of God in the person of Christ – we must recognise the individual nature of faith. Faith is something exercised by individuals, which enables them to participate in Christ (in, as we have seen, his faithfulness, which is in contrast to human faithlessness) and in the righteous people of God.

Paul's idea of faith was grounded in his Hebrew tradition, but the essential faithfulness sense of faith was something that Paul saw having been achieved by Christ. The sense of faith as trust in the saving action of God, however, remained, and now, for Paul, was directed towards Christ and his faithful death. Such a meaning of faith clearly involves mental, cognitive and emotional activities, all of which operate on a personal, individual level. Faith certainly is a corporate characteristic and defining feature of the people of God; Paul was certainly concerned with the issue of who can claim to be the people of God, for he believed vehemently that this could no longer be restricted to ethnic Israel. But were we to stop here in our consideration of the meaning of faith for Paul, we might miss an important point. Paul's considerations of the failings of both Israel

Burnett, Romans 3 *IBS* 20 Oct 1998

and the Gentiles led him to a deep understanding of the fundamental state of humanity – sinful, in need of a manifestation of the righteousness of God, in need of salvation. This has enormous implications for any one individual, which I find scarcely credible that Paul missed. And the nature of faith itself, which operates primarily at an individual level, indicates further for us that Paul’s gospel at its most fundamental is an individual matter, which offers the individual who is under the wrath of God (3:5), “under sin” ((3:9), and “accountable to God”(3:19) the opportunity of redemption and vindication (3:24,26). Good news indeed.

Gary W. Burnett