

Applying a New Perspective Understanding to Romans 2:12-16

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When considering the purpose behind Romans 2:12-16, many questions and factors that need to be considered. Paul's occasion for writing the epistle was to express his desire, after his ministry efforts in the east, to visit the church in Rome on his planned missionary journey to Spain.¹ However, in moving past his greeting and explaining his desire to visit the church in Rome, what was Paul trying to accomplish in this letter? Was Paul, according to the traditional understanding, setting out a systematic theology of Christianity? Did Paul feel a need to defend himself and his ministry? Was Paul addressing divisions within the church in Rome?² More specifically in regard to this pericope, what is Paul referring to as he repeatedly mentions law? When Paul refers to nature, what does he mean? Is Paul making a Stoic argument, condemning the Jews, or something else? And when Paul refers to the Gentiles who do what the law requires, to whom is he referencing? How one chooses to answer these questions will greatly impact how to read this pericope and the rest of Romans. While researching what scholars have said about this passage, one can quickly observe that there seems to be as many interpretations as there are interpreters, with only a handful of factors generally agreed upon by the majority of the scholars. However, one position that effectively addresses issues that arise in this pericope comes from the New Perspective on Paul movement. While addressing issues over Paul's emphasis on the law in this pericope, the New Perspective's interpretation also notes how Paul addresses, "the tensions caused by a Jewish gospel being offered to Gentiles."³ On account of the benefits that are offered by employing the New Perspective's approach to Paul and Romans, it should serve as one of the primary lenses through which to read Paul's epistle to the church in Rome.

Before looking in detail at what Paul is saying in this portion of his letter, it is important to look back to what has preceded in the epistle in order to

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begins the letter to the church in Rome by expressing his desire to visit them and stresses that he is eager to preach the gospel in Rome before moving on to a discussion of the immoral behavior of mankind. Not only is mankind acting

Having worked to understand the context of which Paul positions Romans 2:12-16, one is now almost prepared to engage the text to discern Paul's argument in this pericope. However, before moving ahead with this pursuit, one must first address three issues that are critical to understanding this passage. In order to understand Paul's argument, one must first decide for himself or herself what Paul means when he uses the words νόμος, φύσις, and ἔθνη in this pericope. This process can be long and trying, and should be attempted with thoughtful and prayerful patience. Each of these three words will be considered before moving forward with the argument of the pericope, as the conclusions that are reached in this discussion will be of essential importance.

How should one understand νόμος? As variations of this word appear eleven times in these five verses, defining this term is critical. As has been noted by Kleinknecht, the word comes from the verb νέμω, "'to allot,' and thus has the sense of 'what is proper,' 'what is assigned to someone.'"⁴ For this reason, νόμος is often translated as "law," often understood in a religious context.⁵ In Greek culture, νόμος was highly regarded, as it was believed to proceed from the spirit⁶. Based upon this belief, mere observance of νόμος was not the goal. "Hence genuine law is no mere imperative. It is that wherein a being or something of intrinsic validity is discovered and apprehended."⁷ For Paul, however, νόμος as law was viewed as the Old Testament Law.⁸ On account of this understanding, νόμος, when used by Paul, goes far beyond observance. "[It] is supremely that which demands action from man, a specific will. Hence, one 'does' the Law."⁹ Moreover, Paul viewed the Law as, "the living will of God,"¹⁰ and applied this understanding to νόμος, regardless of whether or not a definite article was used in conjunction; "a" law should not be understood as distinct from "the" Law.¹¹ This understanding of νόμος is especially important to Romans 2:12-16. As Gutbrod has argued, in this passage, Gentiles are viewed as doing what is required of the Law, and not only that, but becoming the Law to themselves.¹² Further discussion on the Law in this passage will be addressed later.

Moving forward, what does Paul mean when he uses the word φύσις? As has been noted by Köster, φύσις was originally a term applied to plants, meaning "form" or "nature," with the word later being applied to humans and animals.¹³ In the Greek mindset, when applying φύσις to humanity, it is generally used to discuss, "the nature and qualities of man,"¹⁴ and can be used to

draw special contrast between a person's "true nature" and actions.¹⁵ In attempting to summarize the Greek understanding of φύσις, Köster asserted, "The aim is not to comprehend nature as a whole... but to see the true constitution of individual things."¹⁶

The difficulty that φύσις causes in Romans 2:12-16 is its presence in verse 14. An ongoing debate has taken place on whether to attach the φύσις variant here with the Gentiles not having the law or fulfilling what the law requires. A more traditional understanding of this verse connects the φύσις with the proceeding statement of fulfilling what the law requires. Those who hold this perspective assert that Paul is arguing that there are Gentiles who fulfill parts of the Law in their lives out of a moral sensitivity, and that on the Day of Judgment, it will be better for these Gentiles than the Jews who had the Law but did not follow it.¹⁷ However, there are scholars who argue that the φύσις variant should be attached with the preceding statement of the Gentiles not having the law.¹⁸ Given these two perspectives, the latter seems to be the more probable for a couple of reasons. First, φύσις appears in the dative tense in this verse, often being translated as "by nature." However, another translation for φύσις in the dative is "by birth."¹⁹ Some scholars have noted that this translation would be appropriate; Gentiles did not receive the Law "by birth" or "by birthright" like the Jews.²⁰ Second, following what was said above on φύσις being used to understand the nature of its subject, some scholars have argued that Paul would have been using φύσις here to describe the Gentiles' identity rather than their behavior.²¹ Finally, it has been noted that if φύσις were to be applied to the Gentile's doing of the Law, Paul would state twice in this verse that the Gentiles do not have the Law.²² While this argument may not seem as strong as the previous two, it still raises the question as to why Paul would simply state the Gentiles' lack of the Law twice in the same verse.

It has been noted that φύσις plays an important role in the development of the Stoic natural theology,²³ and there are those who argue that Paul is employing a Stoic argument in Romans. The argument follows the idea that Paul uses φύσις in Romans 2 as a call back to Paul's apparent condemnation of the Gentiles in the preceding chapter for evil practices that were against nature.²⁴ Such language was often employed in Stoic circles, as all actions were seen as either in accordance to nature or going against nature.²⁵ After making this appeal to a Stoic argument in Romans 1, scholars who argue for this position say

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that in Romans 2:14, Paul is saying that there are some Gentiles who are led by φύσις, understood here as nature, to fulfillment of a law, bringing forth the Stoic image of the sage.²⁶ However, this perspective of Paul employing a Stoic argument does not seem probable. For one reason, it has been noted that the language of relationships that are “against nature,” especially in regard to sexual relationships, is more common, and not just limited to Stoic philosophy.²⁷ Moreover, one has to remember to which law Paul is discussing here. Following in the line of Gutbrod’s perspective that was discussed above, Dunn argues that, “Paul is not asserting the existence of a natural law as such; the law in question is still the Jewish law.”²⁸

Further, understanding φύσις helps one to get a better picture of who Paul is referring to with the variation of ἔθνη in verse 14. For certain, one may read ἔθνη as Gentiles; the issue is how one interprets Paul’s use of Gentiles here. Some scholars argue that Gentiles in this instance should be understood as non-believing Gentiles.²⁹ From this perspective, as was discussed above, there are Gentiles who, out of a sense of moral sensitivity, will naturally fulfill elements of the Law. However, another perspective argued by scholars is that Paul, when mentioning Gentiles here, is referring to Christian believers.³⁰ If one does view φύσις as being connected to its preceding content of not having the Law, the door is left open for this interpretation, as Gentile Christians would not have had the Law by birthright.³¹

Käsemann, disagreeing with the Gentile Christian hypothesis, argued that Paul could not have had believers in mind, as they were not “without the Law.”³² However, Käsemann’s argument seems to be flawed, as Paul does not say that the Gentiles in verse 14 are without the Law. Rather, Paul uses different language, saying that the Gentiles were ones who did not have the Law (by nature, if one connects φύσις with this phrase). This is a small, but very important distinction, which will be significant when Paul’s message of the text is described below, as one of his main arguments seems to be that mere possession of the Law is not sufficient.

Moreover, some scholars see Paul quoting Jeremiah 38 in verse 15, when he says that the Gentiles show that the work of the Law is written on their hearts.³³ As Jewett asserts, “Paul is implying that the Jeremiah prophecy has been fulfilled in an unexpected manner as the gospel recruits Gentiles to become the heirs of the divine promise who perform the ‘work of the law’ in their love feasts.”³⁴ In other words, Jewett, among others, is arguing that the Gentiles in verse 15 should be viewed as Christians as Paul is describing them as living out the divine promise of Jeremiah 38. That God chose to write His Law on their

hearts is proof of their relationship with Him. Käsemann argues against this perspective, as “no eschatological facts are made known.”³⁵ However, while no eschatological ends are expressly made known, eschatological themes play an essential part in this pericope, as Paul discusses who shall perish, who will be judged, and who will be declared righteous in verses 12 and 13. Furthermore, Gathercole sees the Gentile Christians obedience as an eschatological event in itself.

The new covenant, on the other hand, will be characterized by a new obedience. Not performed naturally, of course: rather, it is the result of God himself writing the Law on hearts (LXX Jer. 38.33), and circumcising his people by the Spirit (Rom. 2.29)...[N]ew covenant obedience *is* God’s eschatological gift.³⁶

From these arguments, it seems very probable that Paul could be implying that the Gentiles in verse 15 are Christian believers. Further, while not all members of the New Perspective movement agree that these Gentiles were believers, the hypothesis seems to fit very well into the New Perspective’s interpretation of this pericope.

Having looked at the background issues surrounding this pericope, one can now begin to explore the message of the passage. Before examining what the New Perspective brings to the interpretation of this pericope, however, it would first be beneficial to look at what scholars can agree upon is present within the text. If one were to be looking for a thrust statement to summarize this pericope, the answer can be found within verses 12 and 13: Possession of the Law is not sufficient for justification before God, but rather the doing of the Law.³⁷ Moreover, Paul begins to demonstrate the equality of Jews and Gentiles in their need for justification before God. “[H]e begins to develop the argument that even the law does not mark a clear distinction between Jew and Greek, that Jew is not better than Gentile for having the law.”³⁸ However, the New Perspective’s interpretation adds more to the understanding of what Paul is possibly saying, especially in light of the background issues that have been discussed above.

Incorporating a New Perspective approach to the text brings out possible nuances of Paul’s argument that traditional approaches miss. Whereas traditional approaches view Paul’s argument in Romans as a condemnation of

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the Jewish faith as a, “religion understood in terms of human achievement,”³⁹ the New Perspective argues that,

Paul’s critique of Judaism rests entirely on his Christian experience and thus has nothing to do with the actual contours of Jewish practice in his time. To understand Paul’s counterpoising of gospel against law as a polemic against an alleged legalism in contemporary Judaism, following the mainstream of Pauline interpretation, is thus perceived to be a dangerous distortion. Starting from the premise of faith in Jesus as Christ, Paul’s only criticism of Judaism was that it did not accept this premise.⁴⁰

In other words, the New Perspective argues that Paul is not condemning his Jewish brothers and sisters for holding on to the Law, but rather that their focus in following the Law was not Christ, and therefore incomplete. In support of this position, one can observe that Paul says that those who do the law shall be justified (Rom 2:13). If Paul were arguing against the Law in general, why would he include this statement?

So what does the New Perspective add to the interpretation of Romans? According to the New Perspective, it seems as though Paul is appealing to the Jews to put aside the works of the Law that divided the Jew and Gentile. “It is the Jewish boast in this privileged status as marked out by their obedience to the Law which Paul seeks to counter by his focus on faith...It is the Law typified by Jewish works and a focus of Jewish zeal... which Paul sees to have been ended by Christ.”⁴¹ Paul is arguing that the Jews need to stop dividing themselves from their Gentile brothers and sisters. If one understands Gentiles in this passage as referring to Gentile Christians, this becomes even more apparent. Paul is pointing to the Gentile Christians as having the work of the Law written on their hearts as proof for their inclusion as God’s people. Further, where the traditional interpretation is correct in identifying the equal need of Jews and Christians for justification before God, the New Perspective illustrates their equal privilege as being God’s people.

As more and more work is being done by scholars who both agree and disagree with the New Perspective, passages like this one give credence to the need for further research. While it would be foolish to argue that the interpretation expressed above is the only interpretation worth giving consideration, it certainly opens the door for further discussion on how the New Perspective should inform our contemporary Christian identity and faith. If the

New Perspective is correct, how should Christians therefore live their lives, if their understanding of Paul has been too polemical?

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 22.
- ² These questions, and others, are raised by Cranfield, *Epistle*, 23; James D.G. Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 840, 842.
- ³ Dunn, "Romans," 843.
- ⁴ H. Kleinknecht, "νόμος A," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IV, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 1023.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 1029.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 1035.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 1035.
- ⁸ W. Gutbrod, "νόμος D," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IV, ed. Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 1069. Although, Gutbrod does note that Paul sometimes employs νόμος when not speaking about the Old Testament Law. However, of Paul's usages, understanding νόμος as the Old Testament Law seems to be the standard in most cases.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 1070.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1070.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1070.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 1070.
- ¹³ H. Köster, "φύσις," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. IX, ed. Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 252.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 253.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 253.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 254.
- ¹⁷ Scholars that argue for this perspective include James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 105; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 305.
- ¹⁸ Scholars that argue for this perspective include Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, *Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 214; Cranfield, *Epistle*, 156.
- ¹⁹ Köster, "φύσις," 252.

²⁰ Scholars included in this discussion are Jewett, *Romans*, 214; Cranfield, *Epistle*, 156-157; Simon J. Gathercole, "A Law unto Themselves: The Gentiles in Romans 2.14-15 Revisited," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 85 (2002): 37.

²¹ Scholars included in this discussion are Jewett, *Romans*, 214; Gathercole, "Law unto Themselves," 36.

²² Gathercole, "Law unto Themselves," 37.

²³ Köster, "φύσις," 263.

²⁴ John W. Martens, "Romans 2:14-16: A Stoic Reading," *New Testament Studies* 40 (1994): 57.

²⁵ Köster, "φύσις," 264-265.

²⁶ Martens, "Stoic," 60.

²⁷ Köster, "φύσις," 262.

²⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 105.

²⁹ Included in this discussion are Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 305; Dunn, *Romans*, 105.

³⁰ Included in this discussion are Gathercole, "Law unto Themselves," 29; Cranfield, *Epistle*, 157; Jewett, *Romans*, 213.

³¹ Cranfield, *Epistle*, 157.

³² Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 65.

³³ Included in this discussion are Jewett, *Romans*, 215; Gathercole, "Law unto Themselves," 41; Cranfield, *Epistle*, 159.

³⁴ Jewett, *Romans*, 215.

³⁵ Käsemann, *Romans*, 64.

³⁶ Gathercole, "Law unto Themselves," 42. Emphasis his.

³⁷ Scholars who have noted this include Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 305; Käsemann, *Romans*, 61; Jewett, *Romans*, 210; Dunn, *Romans*, 104; Cranfield, *Epistle*, 153.

³⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 104.

³⁹ Dunn, "Romans," 842.

⁴⁰ Robert Jewett, "The Law and the Coexistence of Jews and Gentiles in Romans," *Interpretation* 39 (1985): 347.

⁴¹ Dunn, "Romans," 844.