3

Sinful Gentiles

INTRODUCTION

Paul's deft declaration "there is no longer Jew or Greek ... for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28) did much to secure his reputation as someone who – unprecedentedly, according to some – abolished ethnic boundaries and rendered ethnic identities irrelevant. David Aune, for instance, argues that "this is a quite astonishing conception that seems to abolish in principle all inequalities based on nationality."[1] I will take up the question of the social implications of this and similar Pauline claims later in this study.[2] At the present juncture, I propose to explore the extent to which Paul's insistence on the inclusion of Gentiles precluded him from espousing negative stereotypes about Gentiles.

Galatians is an interesting test case in this regard because in addition to 3:28, the passage just quoted, the letter also includes the following statement by Paul to Cephas: "We ourselves are Jews by birth (φύσει) and not Gentile sinners" (Gal 2:15). In the estimation of Pheme Perkins, this is "such a blatant example of Jewish ethnic stereotyping ... that one wonders how a person who has spent at least fifteen years preaching to and living with Gentiles came out with it."[3]

[1] David E. Aune, "Human Rights and Early Christianity," in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 87.

[2] See Chapter 6 on Col 3:11, a passage that has much in common with Gal 3:28, as well as the Conclusion (esp. p. 223).

[3] Pheme Perkins, *Abraham's Divided Children: Galatians and the Politics of Faith*, The New Testament in Context (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2001), 58.

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In this chapter, I take a closer look at this and other passages about Gentiles throughout the Pauline corpus to examine if and how Paul, despite his inclusionary stance, engaged in ethnic stereotyping of non-Jews, and to trace the impact of these Pauline passages on how ethnic outgroups were viewed in the modern era. Section 3.1 discusses a number of shorter passages in which Paul suggested that Gentiles were especially inclined to engage in sinful behavior (Gal 2:15, 1 Thess 4:3–5, 1 Cor 5:1). Section 3.2 turns to Paul's more elaborate description of Gentile conduct in Romans 1:18–32 and the closely related passage in Ephesians 4:17–19. Section 3.3 explores how these texts, Rom 1:18–32 in particular, influenced attitudes toward ethnic outgroups in the nineteenth century. This chapter's discussion of Pauline attitudes toward Gentiles, a relatively widely acknowledged instance of ethnic stereotyping in Paul's letters, forms the basis for some of the arguments that will be advanced about Pauline stereotyping of other groups in later chapters.

3.1 NATURAL SINNERS (GAL 2:15, 1 THESS 4:3–5, 1 COR 5:1)

In Gal 2:15, Paul suggests that Gentiles are sinners by definition. There are people like Peter and Paul himself who are "by nature Jews" (φύσει Ἰουδαῖοι) and they are to be distinguished from the rest of humanity: the "sinners from the Gentiles" (ἐξ ἐθνῶν ἁμαρτωλοί). The understanding that sinfulness and "Gentileness" were coterminous seems to be presupposed in a number of other statements in Paul's letters that will be discussed later on in this section (1 Thess 4:3–5, 1 Cor 5:1). Paul does not explain in Galatians why he believed that Gentiles were sinners, but it is evident from his comments elsewhere that their misguided worship was at the heart of this assessment. In 1 Cor 12:2, Paul writes: "You know that when you were *ethnē*, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak." The Greek word *ethnē* ("Gentiles") may alternatively be translated as "pagans" or "heathens," which brings out more clearly that misguided worship and cultic practices were essential to their (ascribed) identity. Paul clearly has this sense in mind in 1 Cor 12:2: his addressees were *ethnē* no longer, because their allegiance had shifted to the God of Israel. Paul could, however, also refer to Christ-followers as *ethnē* (e.g., Rom 11:13, 15:27), suggesting that even though they had turned to the God of Israel, they were not fully incorporated into Israel, but remained non-Jews.[4]

[4] Paula Fredriksen nicely captures this feature of Paul's thought by referring to his addressees as "ex-pagan pagans." For discussion of the extent to which the *ethnē* assumed a new

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With the exception of the relatively tiny group that had turned to the God of Israel, the Gentiles were from Paul's perspective "enticed and led astray to idols." They were unfamiliar with God's laws and purpose as revealed in the Torah. It is only to be expected, from that perspective, that they would engage in sinful behavior. It is tempting to conclude that any immorality that the Gentiles engaged in was simply a matter of erroneous religious conceptions. Yet Paul associates the difference between Jew and Gentile with "nature" or "birth" (*physis*). Paul may have reasoned along the same lines as Josephus when he wrote with regard to "our own writings" that it "it is *innate in all Jews, right from birth* (πᾶσι δὲ σύμφυτόν ἐστιν εὐθὺς ἐκ πρώτης γενέσεως Ἰουδαίοις), to regard them as decrees of God, to remain faithful to them and, if necessary, gladly to die on their behalf" (*C. Apion.* 1.42).[5] The key difference between Jews and Gentiles was that the former observed the Torah and the latter did not, but this difference, according to Josephus, was inborn. This passage nicely illustrates the intertwinement of genealogy and religion/cult in much of antiquity.[6] Whether Paul's reference to nature means that he considered Gentiles to be hardwired as sinners or that he believed that they were doomed to engage in such behavior because they were born into idolatrous cultures, it is evident that he regarded sinfulness as a fundamental aspect of Gentile identity.[7]

Paul's key point in Galatians, though, is that this distinction between Law-observant Jews and "Law-less" Gentiles is no longer significant, because "we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal 2:16). Jew and Gentile are in the same position; they can be justified only through the faith(fulness) in (or

ethnic identity, see the recent exchange between Denys N. McDonald, "'Ex-Pagan Pagans'? Paul, Philo, and Gentile Ethnic Reconfiguration," *JSNT* 45 (2022): 23–50 and Paula Fredriksen, "Paul, Pagans and Eschatological Ethnicities: A Response to Denys McDonald," *JSNT* 45 (2022): 51–65.

[5] Translation: Barclay, *Against Apion* (adapted).

[6] For useful reflections on this point, see Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 83–89, who notes that this intertwinement is by no means restricted to antiquity.

[7] In support of the interpretation that "nature" is to be understood in terms of the condition of Gentiles at birth (they were born as Gentiles and hence, by nature, without the Torah), cf. the parallel in Rom 2:14 where Paul speaks of "Gentiles who by nature [or: by birth] do not have the Law" (ἔθνη τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα φύσει). For compelling arguments that this is best taken with the preceding clause rather than with the following (τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν), see Stanley K. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 115–16; Simon J. Gathercole, "A Law unto Themselves: The Gentiles in Romans 2.14–15 Revisited," *JSNT* 24 (2002): 35–37.

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of) Jesus Christ.[8] Was Paul then being ironic when he suggested that Gentiles are sinners by nature?[9] Or was he momentarily adopting the perspective of his opponents?[10] Not necessarily. Paul's point is not that the Gentiles are *not* sinners after all but that Jews, despite the Law, are sinners also since they too cannot be justified by the Law but only through *pistis*. As Paul puts it in Gal 2:17, "in our effort to be justified in Christ, we too have been found to be sinners" (ζητοῦντες δικαιωθῆναι ἐν Χριστῷ εὑρέθημεν καὶ αὐτοὶ ἁμαρτωλοί). The sinfulness of the Gentiles is uncontested; the question at issue is whether Jews were any different, because if so, it would be advisable for Gentiles to start living like Jews or even become proselytes (cf. Gal 2:14). It is this view that Paul vehemently contests throughout the letter to the Galatians. Gentiles need not become or live like Jews, because even those who are Jews *by nature* are sinners who require justification by *pistis* and cannot be justified by works of the Law. As Paul would later put it in his letter to the Romans: "All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin" (Rom 3:9, cf. 3:23, Gal 3:22).

There is good reason to think that for Paul, despite his view that Jews were under the power of sin as well, Gentiles engaged in sinful behavior more readily, frequently, and naturally. This is suggested not just by the language of "sinners from the Gentiles" in Gal 2:15 but also by his references to typical Gentile behavior elsewhere. One such reference appears in 1 Thess 4:3–7:

> For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality (πορνεία); that each one of you know how to control (κτᾶσθαι) your own body

[8] The translation of πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ involves two intricate, ongoing debates in Pauline scholarship: (1) the question whether Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is a subjective or objective genitive and (2) the translation of πίστις. Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith:* Pistis *and* Fides *in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 267–74, makes a plausible case for reading the phrase as expressing "simultaneously Christ's faithfulness to God and human faith in Christ" (273).

[9] J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, 3rd ed. (London; Cambridge: MacMillan and Co., 1869), 114. Followed by Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 83; Robert K. Rapa, *Galatians*, rev. ed, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapid: Zondervan, 2008), 538: "Paul, however, uses the term 'Gentile sinners' ironically here, as a means to get Peter's (and now the Galatians') attention."

[10] F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 137; James D. G. Dunn, "Echoes of Intra-Jewish Polemic in Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *JBL* 112 (1993): 464; J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 248; Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2011), 142.

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(σκεῦος) in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion (ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας), like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother (τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ) in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness (οὐ ... ἐπὶ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ ἀλλ' ἐν ἁγιασμῷ).

Much is contested in the interpretation of this passage. What is the meaning of σκεῦος ("vessel")? Does this refer to the believer's wife or to his body or perhaps, more specifically, to his sexual organ? Does κτᾶσθαι mean "to acquire," "to live with," or "to control"? In other words, is Paul speaking about "acquiring a wife," "living with one's wife," or about "controlling one's body" or, perhaps, "controlling one's sexual organ"? And what does any of this have to do with wronging or exploiting one's brother (4:6)?[11] Finally, when Paul writes "not with lustful passion" in 4:5, is that an instruction that applies to "controlling the body"/"having a wife" or, more generally, to all sexual matters, so that he in effect continues the warning against sexual immorality (πορνεία) in 4:3?[12] None of these questions have to be resolved, fortunately, to deduce that Paul regards "the Gentiles who do not know God" (perhaps understood by Paul as all Gentiles except for the Christ-believers among them), as sexual sinners; he describes them as acting "with lustful passion" (ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας).[13]

That Paul presents the behavior of Gentiles in this manner should perhaps not occasion much surprise. Although there are insufficient grounds to support the claim that "sinners of the Gentiles" (Gal 2:15) was "a colloquialism used by Jews,"[14] the notion that Gentiles frequently

[11] For helpful discussion of these issues, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 32B (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 226–28; Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 267–72; Traugott Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, KEK 13 (Zürich: Benziger, 1986), 156–59.

[12] So, e.g., Holtz, *Der erste Brief an die Thessalonicher*, 160: "Offensichtlich hat sich der Gedanke von der spezifischen Aussage des unmittelbar Vorangehenden gelöst und wieder dem Gebiet des gesamenten sexuellen Lebens zugwendet, so daß der Vergleichsatz in einem gewissen Grade selbständig in Opposition zu der ganzen vorangehenden Aussage tritt."

[13] The words πάθος and ἐπιθυμία can have more general meanings, but in the present context in which sexual ethics are at issue, the NRSVue's rendering "lustful passion" captures the sense well. It also fits Paul's usage of πάθος and ἐπιθυμία elsewhere (see, e.g., Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, 273).

[14] Longenecker, *Galatians*, 83: "'Sinners of the Gentiles' (ἐξ ἐθνῶν ἁμαρτωλοί) seems to be a colloquialism used by Jews with reference to Gentiles." Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*, 15th ed., KEK (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), 88–89, claims that

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engaged in a variety of sins is attested in several roughly contemporaneous Jewish texts. Specifically, non-Jews were commonly regarded as sexually debased. According to Jubilees 25:1, "everything that they do (consists of) sexual impurity and lewdness."[15] Wisdom 14:24–26 claims that "they no longer keep either their lives or their marriages pure, but they either kill one another by treachery or grieve one another by adultery. And all things are an overwhelming confusion of . . . sexual perversion, disorder in marriages, adultery and debauchery."[16] Such assessments draw on biblical polemic against the Canaanites but also reflect the reality that Hellenistic and Roman sexual mores were generally quite different from what the Torah prescribes.

Still, when Paul suggests that non-believing Gentiles were without exception driven by "lustful passion" (ἐν πάθει ἐπιθυμίας, 1 Thess 4:5), this is hardly a nuanced or fair assessment.[17] Even if we restrict "the

"the Jew" would "often" refer to Gentiles as sinners. For criticism of the view that "sinner" was a Jewish *terminus technicus* for "Gentile," see Rolf Dabelstein, *Die Beurteilung der "Heiden" bei Paulus*, BBET 14 (Frankfurt a.M: P. D. Lang, 1981), 62–63; Günter Klein, "Individualgeschichte und Weltgeschichte bei Paulus," in *Rekonstruktion und Interpretation: Gesammelte Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament* (München: Christian Kaiser, 1969), 182.

[15] Translation: James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees 24–50: A Commentary on the Book of Jubilees*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 728. Rebekah is here speaking about the Canaanite wives of Esau, but the description is likely meant to be more broadly applicable. As VanderKam notes (732): "These women, according to Rebekah, behave as Abraham had told Jacob the nations habitually conducted themselves (22:16–17; cf. 23:17). Their behavior matches their unfortunate ethnic origin."

[16] Translation: NETS. Similarly, Sib. Or. 3.594–600 (Translation: Rieuwerd Buitenwerf, *Book III of the Sibylline Oracles and Its Social Setting*, SVTP 17 [Leiden: Brill, 2003], 240–41): "They [the Jews] completely outdo all other people in their respect for the holy marriage bed. And they do not have intercourse with youths in a shameful way, as the Phoenicians, the Egyptians, the Latins, spacious Greece, and many nations of other people do, Persians, Galatians, and all Asia, who violate the holy law of the immortal God." (cf. 3.36–45; 3.184–86; 3.764); Let. Aristeas 153 (Translation: Benjamin G. Wright, *The Letter of Aristeas: Aristeas to Philocrates or On the Translation of the Law of the Jews*, CEJL 8 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015], 272): "For most of the rest of humankind defile themselves when they have associations, committing great injustice, and countries and entire cities exalt themselves by them. For not only do they procure males, but also they defile mothers and even still daughters. We, however, have been kept apart from these things." On the difference between the sexual ethics of Jews and Gentiles, see also Philo, *Joseph* 42–43 and, more indirectly, Josephus, *C. Apion.* 2.199–201.

[17] Similarly, Rudolf Hoppe, *Der erste Thessalonikerbrief: Kommentar* (Freiburg: Herder, 2016), 238, notes: "Dabei darf nicht übersehen warden, dass er [Paulus] der faktischen Praxis der außerjüdisch-christlichen Welt kaum gerecht wird." M. Eugene Boring, *I & II Thessalonians: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: WJK, 2015), 147: "Based on the view that idolatry inevitably leads to base sexual sins, the biblical and Jewish tradition in which

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Gentiles" to the inhabitants of the Roman world, rather than non-Jews everywhere, counterevidence can readily be cited. Philosophers of various stripes promoted sexual restraint. Some argued that sexual activities should be limited to relations within marriage with procreative intent.[18] Others criticized adultery and prostitution, in ways not unlike Paul.[19] While such attitudes were comparatively common among philosophers, it was not limited to them. As Origen observed, "the philosophers who follow Zeno of Citium avoid adultery; but so do the Epicureans and also some who are quite uneducated" (*Contra Celsum* 7.63).[20] Paul's stress on the sexual deviance of Gentiles is also questionable inasmuch as it suggests that among Jews, impure desires and sexual malfeasance were not an issue, which was obviously not the case, as Paul was well aware (cf. 1 Cor 10:8).[21]

It is implausible that Paul was unaware that not all Gentiles lived in "lustful passion," not least because his writings evince familiarity with popular philosophical traditions. As Abraham Malherbe notes, "Paul's familiarity with the philosophical traditions raises the question as to how his comment on pagan lustful passion is to be understood." Malherbe observes that Paul's use of "traditional polemic, however far off the mark it may be," is driven by parenetic considerations. Paul draws a sharp contrast in order to incentivize his readers to avoid certain behavior and fully embrace their new identity.[22]

Paul had been reared sometimes accepted and uncritically assumed stereotypes of Gentile behavior (see, e.g., Jub. 25.1; Wis 14:22–26; Rom 1:18–32). We know that there were tender, loving, and responsible relationships within Gentile families and that such stereotypes should not continue to be assumed and circulated."

[18] E.g., Musonius Rufus, *fr.* 12, "Men who are not wantons or immoral are bound to consider sexual intercourse justified only when it occurs in marriage and is indulged in for the purpose of begetting children, since that is lawful, but unjust and unlawful when it is mere pleasure-seeking, even in marriage" (Χρὴ δὲ τοὺς μὴ τρθφῶντας ἢ μὴ κακοὺς μόνα μὲν ἀφροδίσια νομίζειν δίκαια τὰ ἐν γάμῳ καὶ ἐπὶ γενέσει παίδων συντελούμενα, ὅτι καὶ νόμιμά ἐστιν· τὰ δε γε ἡδονὴν θηρώμενα ψιλὴν ἄδικα καὶ παράνομα, κἂν ἐν γάμῳ ᾖ). Translation: Cora Lutz, "Musonius Rufus, the Roman Socrates," *Yale Classical Studies* 10 (1947): 56. Similarly, Plutarch, *Conj. praec.* 42 (*Moralia* 144B).

[19] Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* 7.133–52 contains a long and forceful criticism of prostitution and adultery. Epictetus, *Diatr.* 2.4 offers a critique of adultery (see also 4.9). Similarly, Musonius Rufus, *fr. 12*; Seneca, *Ep.* 94.26.

[20] Translation: Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

[21] Cf. warnings against sexual malfeasance in other early Jewish texts, including Sir 9.6, 23.16–27; T. Sim. 5.3; T. Levi 14.5; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 1.280–81, 3.51.

[22] Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, 230; Ernst von Dobschütz, *Die Thessalonicher-Briefe*, Nachdr. d. Ausg. von 1909 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und

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Elsewhere too, disparaging comments about Gentiles function not to criticize any actual pagans who somehow encountered Paul's letters but serve as a darkly hued foil for parenetic purposes. In 1 Corinthians 5:1, Paul expresses his utter horror at an instance of sexual impropriety (πορνεία) by characterizing it as worse than the behavior of Gentiles: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not even among the Gentiles; for a man is living with his father's wife." In reality, such things surely did take place among non-Jews, but Paul is right in the sense that this type of relationship was not generally accepted by Greeks and Romans. Perhaps then we should supply a verb like "tolerated" to Paul's elliptic phrase: "immorality of a kind that is not even *tolerated* among the Gentiles."[23] Important for present purposes is that the rhetorical point hinges on the assumption that Gentiles engaged in all sorts of immorality. From Paul's perspective, it is very telling that even the notoriously sexually deviant Gentiles disapproved of such relationships.

3.2 FILLED WITH EVERY KIND OF WICKEDNESS (ROM 1:18–32)

Paul takes his critical caricaturing of non-Jews up a notch in the first chapter of Romans. He describes how they rejected God (1:18–23) and as a result "became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened" (1:21). God subsequently "gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves" (1:24) and to "dishonorable passions" (1:26), such that men and women exchanged "natural intercourse for unnatural" (1:26–27). This emphasis on what Paul regarded as sexual deviance is familiar from the passages previously discussed. In Romans 1, Paul continues with a list of Gentile traits that implicate them in all sorts of other immoral behavior as well:

> They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters,

Ruprecht, 1974), 166–67, explains Paul's failure to give a more balanced assessment by claiming that the philosophers did not have much success: "Die Versuche heidnischer Moralisten hat P. allerdings nicht berücksichtigt, brauchte das aber auch nicht angesichts der Erfolglosigkeit in den breiten Volksschichten."

[23] So, e.g., Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 384–86, who cites Cicero and Martial in support of the claim that a relationship between a stepmother and stepson would not be approved. For further discussion of 1 Cor 5:1, see below, pp. 121–23.

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insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die – yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them. (Rom 1:29–32)

Scholars have characterized Paul's harsh denunciation in Rom 1:18–32 as utterly unfair in its depiction of the Gentiles. James Barr, for instance, argued that Paul's argument "suffers in the last resort from a narrow prejudice,"[24] E. P. Sanders claimed that "it rests on gross exaggeration,"[25] and Heikki Räisänen even suggested that it would today be qualified as "hate speech."[26] Various scholars have used the language of "stereotyping" to describe Paul's depiction of Gentiles in this passage.[27]

Such scholarly assessments have been questioned on a number of grounds. One common line of defense has been to argue that Paul's depiction of the Gentile world was accurate. Paul was simply reporting the facts. Older commentaries offer various versions of this argument, as we will see when we turn to the history of interpretation later in this chapter. Yet it occurs in quite recent work as well. As critical and influential a scholar as C. H. Dodd could still write in 1959, "the *facts* to which

[24] James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: Gifford Lectures for 1991* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 73.

[25] E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983), 125. Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 84, does not dispute the exaggerated nature but argues that the question should be rephrased: "Historians of early Christianity ought to be trying to understand the conceptual schemes and value systems that generated accounts like Rom 1:18–29 rather than asking whether it matches the facts …. The charge of exaggeration should be rephrased: would Paul's language have seemed an exaggeration in his own time? If so, by whom? And how would such language have functioned and been understood?" For my own tentative answers to these questions, see below.

[26] Heikki Räisänen, *The Bible Among Scriptures and Other Essays*, WUNT 392 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 185.

[27] E.g., Philip F. Esler, *Conflict and Identity in Romans: The Social Setting of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 147, who argues that Paul draws on a "bountiful stock of Judean stereotypes and engages in a fairly extreme type of stereotyping." The language of "stereotyping" is also used by Jacob P. B. Mortensen, "Anthropology or Ethnic Stereotyping in Paul?," in *What Is Human? Theological Encounters with Anthropology*, ed. Eve-Marie Becker, Jan Dietrich, and Bo Kristian Holm (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 135–54; Michael Wolter, *Der Brief an die Römer: Röm 1–8*, vol. 1, EKK 6 (Ostfildern: Patmos Verlag, 2014), 160. Cf. Matthew V. Novenson, "Gentile Sinners: A Brief History of an Ancient Stereotype," in *Negotiating Identities: Conflict, Conversion, and Consolidation in Early Judaism and Christianity (200 BCE–600 CE)*, ed. Karin Hedner Zetterholm et al. (Lanham: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022), 170, who describes Romans 1 as "a chauvinist tale of the origins of gentile idolatry and immorality."

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he here calls attention are sufficiently attested by the satirists of the imperial period ... ancient literature is full of evidence to corroborate Paul's statements."[28] And William O. Walker Jr., in an essay published in *New Testament Studies* in 1999 implausibly claimed that "many non-Christian Gentiles could, without any difficulty, subscribe to everything in the passage."[29] The theory proposed by various scholars that Paul was influenced by his surroundings in Corinth when writing Rom 1:18–32 bears mentioning in this connection as well, as it suggests that even if Rom 1:18–32 was not an accurate depiction of Rome, it *was* an accurate reflection of Corinth at the time.[30]

E. P. Sanders wryly notes that such interpretations show that "we have become too accustomed to thinking of Paul as stating not only the truth of the gospel, but also the gospel truth."[31] Even for readers who subscribe in general to Paul's critical view of the Greco-Roman world, it should be obvious that any claim that non-Jews were invariably "filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice" – to quote but half a verse (1:29a) – bears little relation to reality. As James Barr puts it: "There are ... some substantial gaps, to put it mildly, between the Hellenistic-Jewish anti-idolatrous rhetoric that Paul inherited and applied, and the realities of life in the Greco-Roman world."[32]

I have thus far assumed, along with most scholars, that Rom 1:18–32 refers to Gentiles. Yet the matter is not entirely straightforward, to the possible effect that Paul is not, in fact, engaging in Gentile stereotyping. The question is complicated by Paul's failure to mention the Gentiles directly in 1:18–32, as well as by his evident interest in the opening chapters of Romans in demonstrating the sinfulness of all people, Jews as well as Gentiles (Rom 3:9, cf. 1:16–17). There are nonetheless good grounds for believing that in this particular section of the argument, Paul is thinking primarily of Gentiles: (1) he speaks of people who worship images (1:23); (2) the people in question only have knowledge of God

[28] Charles H. Dodd, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, MNTC (New York: HarperCollins, 1959), 53–54.

[29] William O. Walker, "Romans 1.18–2.29: A Non-Pauline Interpolation?," *NTS* 45 (1999): 548.

[30] E.g., Wolfgang Schrage, *Der erste Brief an die Korinther*, EKK 7 (Zürich: Benziger, 1991), 29: "Es ist vielleicht kein Zufall, daß das mit recht düsteren Farben gemalte Bild der 'Sittenverderbnis' von Röm 1,18-31 in Korinth geschrieben wurde. Das korinthische Milieu ist hier vermutlich nicht ohne Einfluß auf die paulinische Charakterisierung der paganen Moral gewesen."

[31] Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 125.

[32] Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 73–74.

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through nature, not revelation (1:18–20); (3) this section finds significant parallels in Jewish polemic against Gentiles (more on this shortly); and finally (4) Paul is addressing an audience of Gentiles, whom he has identified as such in 1:13–15, just prior to 1:18–32.[33]

In the section immediately following Rom 1:18–32, Paul shifts to the second person singular. The identity of the person whom Paul addresses here has been subject to considerable recent debate but is indecisive for the question of whether Rom 1:18–32 denounces Gentiles.[34] As Matthew Thiessen notes, "However Rom 2:1–16 functions, one simply cannot read it in a way that absolves Paul of holding such negative perceptions of gentiles."[35]

A more radical option that would clear Paul of any charge of stereotyping in Romans 1 is the hypothesis that he in fact disagrees with what is being said here. The basis for this argument is that much of what Paul says in this passage is similar to non-Christian Jewish texts, especially Wisdom 13–15.[36] This observation, sometimes combined with perceived theological and linguistic differences with other Pauline passages and the absence of specifically Christian elements in 1:18–32, has given rise to various interpretive proposals that have as their common denominator that the passage does not reflect Paul's true views.[37] Whether Rom

[33] For further discussion, see Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 83–100; Paul T. Sloan, "Paul's Jewish Addressee in Romans 2–4: Revisiting Recent Conversations," *JTS* 74 (2023): 524–25 and the literature cited there.

[34] Paul's interlocutor has often been identified as a Jew (of the non-Christ-following variety), which would imply that Jews are guilty, according to Paul, of the same outrages committed by Gentiles that he enumerated in 1:18–32. A number of scholars have recently advanced substantial arguments for identifying the interlocutor at this point as a Gentile rather than a Jew. See Stowers, *A Rereading of Romans*, 100–104; Runar M. Thorsteinsson, *Paul's Interlocutor in Romans 2: Function and Identity in the Context of Ancient Epistolography*, Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2003); Rafael Rodríguez and Matthew Thiessen, eds., *The So-Called Jew in Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016). For a critical response to this line of argument, see Sloan, "Paul's Jewish Addressee," 525–33.

[35] Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 53.

[36] For a useful overview of parallels between Rom 1 and Wisdom as well as other Jewish texts, see Ulrich Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer: Röm 1–5*, vol. 1, EKK 6 (Zürich: Benziger, 1978), 96–100.

[37] On the lack of Christian material, see, e.g., Walter Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem*, SNT 9 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1975), 75; Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, 123. The hypothesis that 1:18–2:29 is an interpolation is advocated by J. C. O'Neill, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, PNTC (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), 40–56, 264–72; Walker, "Romans 1.18–2.29". For the claim that Rom 1:18–32 is Paul's version of a view that he opposes, see Calvin

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1:18–32 is seen as an interpolation or as a section in which Paul impersonates the voice of a rival teacher, these hypotheses have failed to persuade most other scholars. Apart from exegetical objections, which have been detailed elsewhere,[38] I am concerned about the politics of excising morally challenging parts from the Pauline corpus and especially about the common corollary of ascribing them to his Jewish contemporaries, Christ-believing or not. A similar dynamic is apparent when scholars insist that Paul's position on, for example, gender inequality reflects his Jewish "past" rather than his true convictions. The net effect of such exegetical moves is that the Jews are blamed for aspects of Paul's thought that interpreters find offensive or otherwise inconvenient.

Still another interpretation of the text that would absolve Paul from blame is to read the text as "enunciat[ing] the principle that all Gentiles commit sin, in thought, word, and deed," rather than that "Paul is charging every single Gentile of these specific sins."[39] Perhaps this is what Paul *meant*, but it is not what he says; this construal does not line up with Paul's actual words. This gets us to the heart of the problem with stereotypes: They express general claims about a group without recognizing obvious exceptions or counterevidence. Casting a wide swath of the world's population as "full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness ...

L. Porter, "Romans 1.18–32: Its Role in the Developing Argument," *NTS* 40 (1994): 210–28. Thomas Schmeller argues that in 1:18–32, the speaker is a Jew pronouncing judgment on the Gentiles and that Paul takes over as speaker in 2:1 (278–85, esp. 282). Schmeller does not, however, believe that Paul disagrees with 1:18–32: "Zwar wird man dem ersten Abschnitt nicht jede Eigenbedeutung absprechen können: es ist sicher *auch* ein Anliegen des Paulus, die Verlorenheit der Heiden darzustellen, wie ihre Wiederaufnahme in 2,12ff zeigt" (Thomas Schmeller, *Paulus und die "Diatribe": Eine vergleichende Stilinterpretation*, NTAbh 19 [Münster: Aschendorff, 1987], 282, emphasis original).

[38] Recent discussion has centered around Douglas A. Campbell's *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), where he argues that "Paul is not speaking in 1:18–32 in his own voice ... but is imitating the rhetoric of another person, the Teacher, who is essentially a Jewish Christian sage" (530). This proposal has been received critically, with much of the criticism focusing on the lack of any indication in the text that Paul has exchanged his own voice for that of his rival. See, e.g., Grant Macaskill, "Review Article: The Deliverance of God," *JSNT* 34 (2011): 150–61; R. Barry Matlock, "Zeal for Paul but Not According to Knowledge: Douglas Campbell's War on 'Justification Theory,'" *JSNT* 34 (2011): 115–49; Robin Guthrie Griffith-Jones, "Beyond Reasonable Hope of Recognition? Prosopopoeia in Romans 1:18–3:8," in *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell*, ed. Chris Tilling (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 161–74.

[39] Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 97–98, with reference to Timo Laato, *Paulus und das Judentum: Anthropologische Erwägungen* (Åbo: Åbo Akademis Förlag, 1991), 113–15.

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gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom 1:29b–31) is problematic if the aim is but to "enunciate the principle" that all of them at times "commit sin, in thought, word, and deed." Paul does not say that *some* Gentiles are only guilty of *some* sins, but he describes them as collectively guilty of these heinous transgressions. His language is notably different from the Letter of Aristeas' claim that "*most of the rest* of humankind (οἱ γὰρ πλείονες τῶν λοιπῶν ἀνθρώπων) defile themselves when they have associations" (152).[40] Paul formulates his charge in a way that does not identify exceptions. It may be that Paul points toward such exceptions shortly afterwards when he speaks of Gentiles who keep the commandments of the Law in Rom 2:14–15, 26–27 (cf. also 2:6–11). It is more likely, however, that this refers to Christ-followers.[41] If so, the Gentile world apart from Christ stands condemned without exception. It is, in sum, difficult to avoid the conclusion that Paul sketches a deeply negative portrait of non-Jews in Rom 1:18–32, which is far too generalizing and deprecating to serve as a reliable description of the Greco-Roman world.

Paul builds on this portrait in subsequent chapters to argue that all of humanity, Jews included, are sinful (3:9, 3:23, 5:12). Making a similar argumentative move as in Galatians, where the sinfulness of Gentiles was taken as a given, Paul proceeds to argue that Jews are equally in need of justification by faith. This does not, however, mean that Jews are equally liable to engage in lawlessness and immorality of every kind as Gentiles are from Paul's perspective.[42] The significance of Rom 1:18–32 for Paul's theological argument intimates that it should not be read as an account that a sociologist might write but as the work of a preacher, whose rhetoric arguably takes a hyperbolic turn in Rom 1:18–32. Would his audience have recognized it as such? Perhaps this is likely, both because of

[40] Translation: Wright, *The Letter of Aristeas*, 272.

[41] Gathercole, "A Law unto Themselves," 27–49; Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: Beyond the New Perspective*, rev. and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 205–16; John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 468; Robert Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 213.

[42] Cf. Novenson, *Paul and Judaism*, 157: "Whereas gentiles' subjection to sin is evident to the naked eye (Paul's naked eye, at least: Rom 1:18-32), Jews' subjection to sin is non-obvious. Paul says that he knows it only via the apocalyptic testimony of the Torah .... Whereas the gentiles' disobedience comprises their entire histories up to now (Rom 11:30), the Jews' disobedience comprises their present resistance to the news of the messiah (Rom 10:16; 11:28, 31)."

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the relative frequency of harsh invective in the ancient world[43] and because as ex-pagan Gentiles, they knew full well that the reality of non-Jewish life was not as dire as Paul describes it. They may well have recognized it as a forceful piece of rhetoric meant to convey that there was something fundamentally wrong with a society that was – literally – Godless.

Be this as it may, as time went on, Paul's words did become "gospel truth," and rather than as hyperbolic rhetoric, Paul's description was taken as an accurate account of the "heathen world." We will explore the impact of this way of reading Romans 1 in more detail in the section on reception history, but before we do, one remaining Pauline passage demands our attention.

Abandoned to Licentiousness (Eph 4:17–19)

Depending on one's view of authorship,[44] the following, disparaging picture painted of Gentile life in Eph 4:17–19 may be regarded as further evidence of Paul's stereotyping of Gentiles or as the first stage in the reception history of Paul's anti-Gentile statements and therefore best read in conjunction with the chapter's next section on the reception of Paul's thought:

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds (μηκέτι ὑμᾶς περιπατεῖν, καθὼς καὶ τὰ ἔθνη περιπατεῖ ἐν ματαιότητι τοῦ νοὸς αὐτῶν). They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance

[43] See Severin Koster, *Die Invektive in der griechischen und römischen Literatur* (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1980); Luke Timothy Johnson, "The New Testament's Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic," *JBL* 108 (1989): 419–41; Oda Wischmeyer and Lorenzo Scornaienchi, eds., *Polemik in der frühchristlichen Literatur: Texte und Kontexte*, BZNW 170 (Berlin; New York: De Gruyter, 2011). For an example of an indictment of an entire society, which comes quite close to Rom 1:18–32, see Seneca, *Ira* 2.9.1–2: "Every place is full of crime and vice; too many crimes are committed to be cured by any possible restraint. Men struggle in a mighty rivalry of wickedness. Every day the desire for wrong-doing is greater, the dread of it less; all regard for what is better and more just is banished, lust hurls itself wherever it likes, and crimes are now no longer covert. They stalk before our very eyes, and wickedness has come to such a public state, has gained such power over the hearts of all, that innocence is not rare – it is non-existent. For is it only the particular man or the few who break the law? On every hand, as if at a given signal, men rise to level all the barriers of right and wrong" (similarly: Seneca, *Ben.* 1.9–10).

[44] While the majority view remains that Ephesians is inauthentic, there are important dissenting voices. E.g., Douglas A. Campbell, *Framing Paul: An Epistolary Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 309–38.

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and hardness of heart. They have lost all sensitivity and have given themselves up to licentiousness, to practice every kind of impurity with greed (οἵτινες ἀπηλγηκότες ἑαυτοὺς παρέδωκαν τῇ ἀσελγείᾳ εἰς ἐργασίαν ἀκαθαρσίας πάσης ἐν πλεονεξίᾳ).

The category of "Gentiles" evidently does not include Christ-believers in this case (cf. 1 Cor 12:2), despite the fact that earlier in the letter, the author had referred to the audience as "you Gentiles" (Eph 3:1, cf. 2:11).[45] The description of these non-believing Gentiles in 4:17–19 is quite close to Rom 1:18–32 in its use of a number of key terms.[46] Yet unlike Romans 1, the passage in Ephesians serves a primarily parenetic purpose: It discusses the sort of thing the audience should avoid, as in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 5, discussed above. The activities that the Gentiles engage in strike a familiar chord, though. The image of Gentiles as preoccupied with "licentiousness," "impurity," and "greed" are familiar from the Pauline texts discussed above and have significant parallels in contemporary Jewish literature.[47]

As in the case of Romans and other Pauline texts describing Gentile behavior, some scholars continue to regard these Pauline statements as accurate social description. According to Harold Hoehner, for instance: "Certainly many, if not most, of the believers in Ephesus were Gentiles and had a lifestyle that is described in these verses (17–19)."[48] Hoehner recognizes the similarities with Romans 1, but this does not lead him to suggest that this is traditional material; instead, he maintains that this "demonstrates that the unregenerate Ephesian Gentiles were exactly the same as those described in Romans"![49]

An increasing number of scholars recognize that such comments mistake rhetoric for social-scientific analysis. As Ernest Best notes, this

[45] Some manuscripts read "remaining (λοιπά) Gentiles" in Eph 4:17, likely in an attempt to resolve this tension, which as noted earlier (p. 41) is also present in the undisputed letters.

[46] On the relationship between Eph 4:17–19 and Rom 1:18–32, see Matthew Thiessen, "The Construction of Gentiles in the Letter to the Ephesians," in *The Early Reception of Paul the Second Temple Jew: Text, Narrative and Reception History*, ed. Isaac W. Oliver, Gabriele Boccaccini, and Lester L. Grabbe, Library of Second Temple Studies 92 (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 19, and the literature cited there.

[47] See Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1998), 417. On whether "licentiousness" and "impurity" in Eph 4:19 refer primarily to sexual immorality or have a more general sense, see Margaret Y. MacDonald, *Colossians and Ephesians*, Sacra Pagina 17 (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2008), 303; Gerhard Sellin, *Der Brief an die Epheser*, KEK 8 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 357.

[48] Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 582.

[49] Hoehner, *Ephesians*, 584.

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"absolute picture of total darkness cannot be true. There is much ... which shows that in fact it was prejudiced."[50] Best wonders what the letter's ex-pagan readers would have made of the "limited and unbalanced view of the nature of Gentile culture" offered by the author of Ephesians: "Did they nod their heads in agreement or did they mutter 'He's got it all wrong'? If the latter, did it shake their confidence in the other things he wrote?" Best is right to note that the one-sided account of Gentile life in Ephesians raises such questions, but as we speculate (such is all we can do) about possible reactions, we should keep in mind that the letter's addressees were hardly a neutral audience. They had left behind their "pagan" way of life, likely at considerable personal costs, and they may have been quite ready to accept such negative assessments, as this strengthened them in their conviction that they had made the right decision in abandoning their previous ways. Moreover, as noted previously in connection to Romans 1, there is reason to think that they may have recognized the rhetorical nature of the description.

3.3 RECEPTION HISTORY

At various points in this chapter, I have pushed back against attempts to regard Paul's anti-Gentile comments as accurate social description. I am hardly the first to do so. In 1895, William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, in their commentary on Romans in the *International Critical Commentary* series, devoted the better part of three pages to a discussion of the accuracy of Paul's comments in Rom 1:18–32. They concluded that these verses cannot "be taken at once as supplying the place of scientific inquiry from the side of the Comparative History of Religion ... neither can they be held to furnish data which can be utilized just as they stand by the historian. The standard which St. Paul applies is not that of the historian but of the preacher."[51] They referred to Ludwig Friedländer's then still relatively recent *Sittengeschichte Roms* (1869–71) for "a calm and dispassionate weighing of the facts," tacitly implying that Paul's account did not warrant that description.[52]

Sanday and Headlam's careful and sober discussion has not become obsolete, because as noted above, the view that Rom 1:18–32 and similar

[50] Best, *Ephesians*, 424–25. See also Thiessen, "The Construction of Gentiles," who uses the language of "ethnic stereotyping" to describe the author's depiction of non-Jews (19, 25).

[51] William Sanday and Arthur Cayley Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 1895), 51.

[52] Sanday and Headlam, *Romans*, 51.

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passages like Eph 4:17–19 offer an accurate account of first-century Greco-Roman life is still found in quite recent publications. These studies are, however, generally a bit more circumspect than those of the Victorian age. For instance, Joseph Agar Beet, a leading English Methodist exegete,[53] maintained in his 1881 Romans commentary that "Tacitus ... who describes Roman society at this time, gives a terrible commentary upon this section, and *a full proof of its truth*."[54] Stuart Moses, the "father of Biblical learning in America,"[55] even went so far as to state "there cannot be the least doubt" that "the picture is just, nay, that it actually comes short of the real state of things."[56] Supporting evidence was deduced from the moral critiques found in Roman historians, moral philosophers, and satirists; but rather than interpreting Paul's jeremiad as a literary topos, these commentators took these diatribes as reliable, descriptive accounts of contemporary social life and identified Paul's analysis as belonging to the same category.[57]

Taking Paul's statements about the Gentile world at face value would have real-world consequences. They would have a major influence on how modern Christians viewed non-Christian ethnic groups in their own day. The modern missionary movement, which was arguably at its zenith during the Victorian era, assigned Rom 1:18–32 an important place.[58] It is no coincidence that we find a reference to that passage, along with an

[53] One encyclopedia entry describes him as "perhaps the greatest 'forgotten' theologian of British Methodism." John A. Vickders, "Beet, Joseph Agar," *DMBI: A Dictionary of Methodism in Britain and Ireland*, accessed January 28, 2025, https://dmbi.online/index.php?do=app.entry&id=286.

[54] Joseph Agar Beet, *A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1881), 59–60, emphasis added.

[55] James T. White, "Stuart, Moses," *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* (New York: White, 1896), 244.

[56] Moses Stuart, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 3rd ed. (Andover: Draper, 1854), 92.

[57] E.g., J. P. Lange and F. R. Fay, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1874), 89, "this dark picture of heathen corruption ... is *by no means overdrawn, and can be fully verified* by testimonies from the first writers of the classical age of ancient Greece and Rome" (emphasis added).

[58] A. F. Walls, "The First Chapter of the Epistle to the Romans and the Modern Missionary Movement," in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays Presented to F. F. Bruce on His 60th Birthday*, ed. W. Ward Gasque and Ralph P. Martin (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1970), 347: "[Rom 1:18ff.'s] special place in the missionary movement is due to the fact that at various times people saw there, or thought they saw there, the non-Christian world that they themselves knew." While true, this is but half the story, for it ignores the reality that Romans 1 had primed missionaries to see the world as Paul described it to them (see below).

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emphasis on its accuracy, on the first page of *The Missionary World, Being an Encyclopædia of Information,* published in London in 1872.[59] Paul's observations on Gentile conduct described, from the perspective of Victorian-age missionaries, what the "heathen world" was like. The terrible realities that Paul insisted were characteristic of the lives of the heathens gave Christians a sense of what to expect of the world beyond the Christian West. Reports of missionary activities claim that Rom 1:18–32 accurately described the peoples encountered by missionaries. As an 1847 issue of the *Baptist Missionary Magazine* put it: "This corrupt state of the heathen was not confined to the days of the apostles. Again and again we have been told by modern missionaries, that if Paul the apostle had visited the heathen of modern days and witnessed their hideous corruption, he could not have penned a more accurate description of them, than in the words . . . from Romans 1."[60] Ephesians 4:17–19 functioned in much the same way. George Trevor, who worked in India as an Anglican priest from 1837 to 1845, reminisced a few years later, when he served as Canon of York: "Every sojourner in India must be continually affected with the terrible exactness of the Apostle's description in Ephesians iv. 'The Gentiles walk in the vanity of their mind . . . who, being past feeling, have given themselves over unto lasciviousness to work all uncleanness with greediness.'"[61] In Chapter 2, I discussed how confirmation bias leads to perceiving stereotype-confirming data more easily than contradicting data (pp. 30–37). That mechanism seems to be in play here. Missionaries expected "heathens" to conform to Paul's

[59] Anonymous, *The Missionary World, Being an Encyclopædia of Information* (London: Elliot Stock, 1872), 1.

[60] Anonymous, "Are the Unevangelized Heathen in Danger of Perishing?," *The Baptist Missionary Magazine* 27 (1849): 69. A number of other examples are collected and discussed in Christina Harker, *The Colonizers' Idols: Paul, Galatia, and Empire in New Testament Studies*, WUNT 2/460 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018), 137.

[61] George Trevor, "Missionary Recollections, No. 10," in *The Parochial Missionary Magazine* (London: Bell, 1849), 87–88. On George Trevor's life and work, see G. Martin Murphy, "Trevor, George (1809–1888), Writer and Church of England Clergyman," *ODNB* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). For another example, see Anonymous, "Baddagama," *The Church Missionary Gleaner* 20, no. 9 (1870): 105, "[In the Baddagama region of Ceylon] about 69,580 still remain in that miserable condition described by St. Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians: 'Having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their hearts, who, being past feeling, have given themselves over unto lasciviousness to work all uncleanness with greediness.' Only the pen of inspiration can fully describe all the misery and cruelty which exist in these dwellings of darkness."

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description and hence readily noted evidence that confirmed the accuracy of this picture.[62]

It was also noted in Chapter 2 that stereotype-inconsistent data is often explained in such a way as to allow the stereotype to remain intact, for instance, by categorizing such data as exceptions to the rule (pp. 36–37). An example of this at limited chronological and geographical remove from the Victorian world may be found in Johannes Warneck's influential *Paulus im Lichte der heutigen Heidenmission*, which maintained that while Rom 1:18–32 accurately describes contemporary heathens, an exception is to be made for the same-sex relations mentioned in 1:26–27, which was not nearly as universal in the non-Christian world as Paul's account would lead one to expect![63] In other cases where counterevidence was observed, a solution was found by regarding admirable aspects of heathen life as due to prior contact with Judaism or Christianity or by claiming that the people in question were distant descendants of one of the lost tribes of Israel.[64] Both strategies allowed the accuracy of Paul's account of heathen life to be upheld by arguing that the people who demonstrated these virtues were not "pure" heathens.

The claim that Rom 1:18–32 accurately described non-Christians outside of the West made its way into biblical exegesis as well. One example is the claim that missionaries were accused by "heathens" of having falsified this text, since it was deemed impossible that a text from centuries ago could so accurately describe their own behavior. This claim shows up, for instance, in the Romans commentary by Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary. He writes, commenting on the vice catalog of 1:29–31:

[62] Robert William Dale, in his 1892 commentary on Ephesians, explicitly makes the point that readers should expect modern day (ex-)heathens to be like those of Paul's day (*The Epistle to the Ephesians: Its Doctrine and Ethics*, 6th ed. [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1892], 305): "It is a horrible picture. But Paul was describing the men among whom he had lived . . . *In the church founded in heathen countries by modern missions we should expect to find the same moral corruptions that stained the life of the church at Ephesus*" (emphasis added).

[63] Johannes Warneck, *Paulus im Lichte der heutigen Heidenmission* (Berlin: Martin Warneck, 1913), 98: "Nur in einem Punkte findet die paulinischen Charakteristik nicht allgemeine Bestätigung. Röm 1, 26f. nennt der Apostle als Merkmal heidnischer Unsittlichkeit die perversen Verirrungen auf sexuellem Gebiet. Solche finden sich nicht allgemein im Heidentum, sondern meistens nur bei Völkern, die an Kulturübersättigung leiden, im antiken und modernen Heidentum sowohl wie auch innerhalb einer sich vom Christentum emanzipierenden Hochkultur. Die Unsittlichkeit bei den meisten heidnischen Völkern bleibt immerhin innerhalb dessen, was natürlich ist."

[64] Walls, "Romans and the Missionary Movement," 349–51.

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What Paul says of the ancient heathen is found to be true, in all its essential features, of those of our own day. It is an interesting fact that the missionaries in the East Indies have frequently been accused by the heathen of having forged the whole of the latter part of this chapter. They cannot believe that such an accurate description of themselves could have been written eighteen centuries ago.[65]

Although Hodge does not draw the connection directly, the claim that Paul's account was "true, in all of its essential features" during the nineteenth century, effectively proves that it must have been true during the first century as well.[66] This brings the argument full circle: The understanding of Rom 1:18–32 as accurate social description shaped the expectations of missionaries going out into the "heathen world," who unsurprisingly found much to confirm the apostle's judgment, and this in turn was used to support the reliability of Paul's assessment of the Gentiles in Romans and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

Despite Paul's firm belief that the ethnic identity of Gentiles did not constitute an obstacle to their incorporation into the Christ-believing communities, his letters feature a number of passages in which Gentiles are depicted in an essentializing, generalizing, depreciatory manner. Paul's conviction that there was no distinction between Jew and Gentile in terms of justification by faith and inclusion in the assemblies of Christ-followers did not mean that he regarded Jews and Gentiles as morally

[65] Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1837), 32–33. The same claim is made in an essay in the very influential *The Fundamentals* series (for historical context, see George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2006], 118–19): "Romans 1:18–3:20 . . . is so true to the facts in heathen life today that modern heathen often accuse Christian missionaries of writing it after they have had personal knowledge of their life and conduct" (Chas. B. Williams, "Paul's Testimony to the Doctrine of Sin," in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth. Compliments of Two Christian Laymen*, vol. 8 [Chicago: Testimony, 1910], 49–63, here, 50).

[66] What Hodge implies is made explicit in a dissertation by a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church defended at the University of Groningen in 1917. The author signals that there is reason to doubt the accuracy of Paul's harsh assessment of the Gentiles but then appeals to reports from the mission field that, he believes, "justify the apostle to the Gentiles." Johan Theodoor Ubbink, "Het eeuwige leven bij Paulus: Een Godsdiensthistorisch onderzoek" (PhD dissertation, University of Groningen, 1917), 78: "Men zou evenzeer de juistheid moeten betwisten van Pls.' strenge oordeel over't heidendom in het algemeen . . .. Toch ligt aan die sombere qualificatie niet maar een missionaire tendenz ten grondslag; de getuigenissen van de tegenwoordige zendingsvelden rechtvaardigen den heidenapostel."

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equal. Various moments throughout the Pauline corpus intimate that he regarded Gentiles as especially liable to engage in a wide variety of sinful acts and thoughts.

Whether it is apt to think of these characterizations in terms of ethnic stereotyping depends in part on whether Gentiles (*ta ethnē*) is understood as an ethnic category. *Ta ethnē* and *ethnic* are obviously related, but the etymological connection does not necessarily settle the case. Like "barbarians" (i.e., non-Greeks), "Gentiles" is a negative label, referring to what these people are not. "Gentiles" is accordingly an almost purely *ascribed* ethnic identity; Gentiles did not think of themselves as Gentiles, at least not outside of a Jewish (or early Christian) context. There is broad scholarly agreement that ancient Jewish identity had an ethnic quality.[67] In Jonathan Hall's terms, for many ancient authors, Jewishness involved "a putative subscription to a myth of common descent and kinship, an association with a specific territory and a sense of shared history."[68] Inasmuch as Jewish identity is ethnic, its negative counterpart, Gentile identity, can be thought of as ethnic as well. The Gentiles' defining characteristic may be "idolatry," but this is a constitutive element and function of ethnic identity; they worship other gods, because they were born and raised non-Jewish.

Paul's claims about Gentiles certainly qualify as ethnic stereotyping in the sense that these are not idiosyncratic views but reflect culturally shared knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about Gentiles. Even if Rom 1:18–32 is marked by comparatively extreme rhetoric, it is clear that Paul is drawing on a reservoir of Jewish antipagan polemic. This does not imply that all Jews thought about Gentiles in this manner. I noted above that pseudo-Aristeas, despite his depreciatory view of non-Jews, allowed for exceptions to the rule. In the work of other authors, like Philo, one searches in vain for comparably harsh assessments of non-Jews.[69] Paul's harsh statements about Gentiles were therefore not

[67] For an overview of recent discussion, see Horrell, *Ethnicity and Inclusion*, 47–55. There has been considerable debate about whether *Ioudaios* is best translated Jew or Judean. Although this discussion is connected to the question of whether ancient Jewish identity is best conceptualized in primarily ethnic or religious terms, even those who defend the translation "Jew" do not dispute that Jewish identity in antiquity had a strong ethnic component. See, for instance, the nuanced discussion by Hodge, *If Sons, Then Heirs*, 11–15, who is highly sensitive to the ethnic qualities of ancient Jewish identity yet argues for retaining the translation "Jew" in most instances.

[68] See discussion on p. 23.

[69] For discussion of Philo's attitudes toward non-Jews, see David T. Runia, "Philo and the Gentiles," in *Attitudes to Gentiles in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. D. S.

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necessitated by his Jewish identity. While he drew on views to which some or even many Jews adhered, his decision to paint such a dark picture of the Gentiles, arguably owed much also to his convictions as a Christ-follower, specifically to his conviction that he had to persuade Gentiles to change their way of life.[70]

Paul's missionary efforts among Gentiles bring us back to Pheme Perkins' comment on Gal 2:15: "One wonders how a person who has spent at least fifteen years preaching to and living with Gentiles came out with" such a "blatant example of Jewish ethnic stereotyping."[71] Over the course of his many years of living among Gentiles, even prior to his apostolic ministry, Paul must have noticed a great deal of stereotype-inconsistent evidence. It was noted above that Paul's gloomy portrayal of Gentile life served various rhetorical purposes. Yet it does not seem compelling to try to explain these sections of his letters as "mere rhetoric" entirely at odds with Paul's true estimation of Gentiles. It may be useful to recall, at this point, the research discussed in Chapter 2 (pp. 36–37) that indicates that if stereotype-inconsistent evidence is registered (which may not even happen, due to confirmation bias), we sometimes ascribe it to a subcategory of the stereotyped group. This allows the stereotype about the broader group to remain unaffected. Such cognitive processes may help explain why Paul continued to espouse deeply negative views about Gentiles. Evidence that could serve to confirm his stereotypical understanding of non-Jews would have been more readily noted than counterevidence. And any counterevidence he did register could be assigned to a subcategory. Paul would have confronted such counter-evidence especially among Gentiles with whom he stayed in close contact, a group that probably overlapped to a considerable extent with Gentiles that accepted his message. The conditions were optimal, then, for devising a subgroup: Christ-following Gentiles. Stereotypes about Gentiles no longer applied to this subgroup but remained in force with respect to the broader category of Gentiles, with whom Paul's interactions were

Sim and J. S. McLaren, LNTS 499 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 28–45. The volume as a whole gives a good sense of the variety in how Jews (and Christians) viewed "Gentiles." Novenson, "Gentile Sinners," highlights a number of early Jewish (as well as early Christian) texts that suggest a more appreciative and evenhanded view of non-Jews. See also the helpful discussion in Terence L. Donaldson, *Judaism and the Gentiles: Jewish Patterns of Universalism (to 135 CE)* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 493–98.

[70] Similarly, Matthias Konradt, *Ethik im Neuen Testament*, Grundrisse zum Neuen Testament (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2022), 134–35.

[71] Perkins, *Abraham's Divided Children*, 58.

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more limited and less personal. The Gentiles at large remained "natural sinners," in Paul's view, but the Christ-believers among them had been miraculously transformed through the power of the gospel.[72]

Paul's stereotypical treatment of non-Jews would have a profound impact on how Christians would view the non-Christian world in the modern period. In the nineteenth century, even though the British Empire had an unprecedented global reach, much of the world remained relatively unfamiliar. What was well known, however, about the "heathens" outside of the Christian realm was what Paul had written about them in his letter to the Romans and elsewhere. Paul's letters functioned as a lens through which the non-Christian world was perceived. Unsurprisingly, given the effects of confirmation bias, missionaries found plenty of evidence that supported Paul's assessments of "heathen life." These experiences in turn were used to reinforce the accuracy of Paul's searing indictments of the Gentiles. While some New Testament texts (e.g., Acts 17:22–31) were cited in support of an open and more tolerant interaction between Christians and "heathens,"[73] the sections of Paul's letters discussed in this chapter facilitated a much darker picture of religious and ethnic outsiders.

[72] Cf. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 468: "Paul is able to parade these heart-obedient Gentiles on the basis of years of experience in founding Gentile churches. He has found 'sinful Gentiles' (Gal 2:15) miraculously endowed with a moral consciousness."

[73] Walls, "Romans and the Missionary Movement," 347.

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