

William S. Campbell

Romans: A Social Identity Commentary

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The T&T Clark Social Identity Commentaries on the New Testament apply Social Identity Theory (SIT) to New Testament exegesis. William S. Campbell offers the first commentary on Romans, to my knowledge, compatible with the so-called “Paul within Judaism” reading of Paul, though he clarifies that his reading of Romans, especially chapters 9–11, “coheres with but is not dependent on ‘Paul within Judaism’ scholarship, which it [i.e., Campbell’s previous research] precedes by at least two decades” (247 n.1).

Like a standard commentary, Campbell offers a sustained exegetical discussion of Paul’s letter to the Romans. Key ideas that undergird Campbell’s exegesis include Paul’s epistolary address to “ethnē in Christ at Rome” (6; see also 17–22), who, he writes, are the audience for Paul’s apostolic vocation as “a Jewish apostle to the nations” (18). Romans is a genuine letter written to the groups of Christ-followers in Rome and addressing the specific circumstances of those groups (12–16; see also Excursus I). Campbell also summarizes significant tenets of SIT (22–32).

There are four substantive excursuses on the following topics: “Paul’s Use of Diatribal Style in Romans” (Excursus I); “The Wrath of God against All Idolatry—A Trajectory from Zephaniah to Romans” (Excursus II); “Slavery to God” (Excursus III); and “Supersessionism at Rome” (Excursus IV). These topics—especially the last—offer some insight into the issues Campbell finds significant for an historically coherent reading of Romans. This commentary also includes an extensive bibliography (“References”) and three indices (Ancient Sources; Biblical Texts; Modern Authors).

Campbell’s volume stands apart from the commentary tradition on Paul’s longest letter, especially inasmuch as he builds appreciatively upon the scholarly reevaluation of Paul’s relationship with his contemporary Jews and their Judaisms. This reevaluation, which is coming to be known as the “Paul within Judaism” perspective, views Paul as a Torah-observant Jew even after his encounter with Jesus. Campbell’s is the first formal commentary that reappraises Paul’s letter in light of this shift in our perspective on Paul (though see Rafael Rodríguez, *If You Call*

Yourself a Jew [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014], which Campbell engages throughout).

We might take note of Campbell's reading of Romans 9–11. Campbell notes that Paul, in the opening verses of these chapters, “identifies with the people of Israel” and “confirms the continuing promises that God has given them” (247). Paul's aim in these chapters is to prove the proposition, “It cannot be that the word of God has failed” (9:6a), by which Paul refers to “God's ongoing covenantal relationship with Israel” (249). Campbell renders 9:6b as a rhetorical question (“all those from Israel are Israel, are they not?”; see 250–53), which construes Paul's meaning exactly opposite to the traditional translation “not everyone from Israel is Israel.” Romans 9, then, addresses *how* Israel came into being, with a distinction drawn between Abraham's and Isaac's children, *but not between Jacob's (= Israel's) children*. Israel may be “presently unconvinced” by Paul's gospel, but Israel's God remains patient to reconcile himself to his unconvinced people (264–65). Paul thus confronts and corrects an arrogant misperception among the Roman ethnē that God has rejected Israel and transferred his election to gentiles in Christ, a misperception that Campbell infers from Rom 11:17–19. Campbell, therefore, goes beyond offering an anti-supersessionist reading of Romans and regards Romans as itself an anti-supersessionist letter, confronting and correcting the supersessionist views of its gentile, Christ-following readers. Rather than casting Israel as “guilty and worthy of punishment,” Paul demonstrates in Romans 9–11 “God's continuing fidelity to Israel despite her temporary obstinacy” (283).

Campbell's discussion of these chapters is creative and insightful. Nevertheless, some of his exegetical decisions are open to debate. For example, it is not necessary to read Romans as directed against an emerging anti-Judaic arrogance among Rome's gentile Christ-followers, as Campbell does. Given Paul's apparent assumption that his readers continued to value certain Jewish theologoumena (the God of Israel as the one Creator God; Jesus as that God's messiah; an interest in the texts of Torah and the prophets; etc.), I do not find any evidence of disdain for Jews or Judaism among Paul's readers. Given that Paul's gentile readers apparently cared about the value of circumcision, the identity of Abraham's children, the nature of Adam's transgression, and the τέλος of the Jews' Torah, it is doubtful that they also came to believe that Jews were covenantal detritus, cast off by Israel's God and now to be pitied (at best) or despised. Paul's hypothetical statement, “You will say: Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in” (Rom 11:19), does not appear to me sufficient basis for Campbell's claim, and not much else in Romans supports it.

Similarly, the rendering of Rom 9:6b as a rhetorical question expecting an affirmative answer enables Campbell to avoid reading Paul as drawing a distinction between Jacob's (= Israel's) children. What is gained at 9:6b, however, is lost at 11:7, where Campbell acknowledges, “Here we have a division within Israel, ‘the elect’ and the ‘the rest’” (291). While Campbell admirably resists readings of 9:6b—and of Romans as a whole—that imagine Paul's stripping Israel of her covenantal election and giving that election to others, it nevertheless remains more likely that Rom 9:6b introduces a distinction among *Israel's* children that appears

again in 11:7. Perhaps Paul is making a distinction (or a division) within Israel without also writing Israel out of the covenant.

Finally, Campbell can give the impression that Paul's sorrow for Israel is caused by her failure to recognize the gospel's efficacy *for gentiles* more than her rejection of the gospel itself. To be sure, Campbell acknowledges that, for Paul, Israel's failure vis-à-vis the gospel consists of "not being persuaded that the Messiah is Jesus" (269) and that the gospel's "revelation of righteousness" is "*for everyone*, both Jews and the nations" (275; italics in the original). Campbell's emphasis, however, falls on Israel's failure to recognize the gospel's inclusion of gentiles as gentiles. For example, in Rom 10:4 Paul "can only be understood as saying that for *ethnē* 'Christ is the goal and completion of the law'" (273). Those today committed to Christian-Jewish relations understandably avoid identifying a lack of faith in Jesus as a critique of Jewish religiosity. It is not so clear, however, that Paul harbored the same hesitation. I would be genuinely interested to know how Campbell would explain the Christological disagreements between Paul and his Jewish contemporaries beyond Paul's defense of gentile worshippers of Israel's God and followers of Israel's Christ.

These disagreements should not detract from the enormous achievement of this commentary. Campbell has provided an original and creative reading of an oft-read letter. He has resisted the pull of traditional and "New Perspective on Paul" readings of Romans and taken seriously the letter's character as a text written by a Jewish author to gentile readers. One hopes that such readings become more common, both among scholars and also among students and preachers of Paul. Toward that end, Campbell's penchant for certain scholarly shibboleths (e.g., his preference for "Christ-following" over "Christian"; or translating πίστις as "trust" rather than "faith"; or a preference for the untranslated, unitalicized *ethnē* instead of "gentiles"; etc.) may present obstacles for uninitiated readers. The \$130 (USD) list price will likely be a hindrance to this book's widespread reception. One hopes T&T Clark will offer an affordable version of this book for individual readers. If that happens, every student of Romans and Paul should add this volume to their library and consult it often.