



Scot McKnight

***Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the
Midst of Empire***

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Reading Romans Backwards is not a conventional commentary.¹ Rather, it is a contextual reading of Romans that begins with features about Paul's Roman audience gleaned from the final five chapters of Romans, especially regarding the so-called weak and strong factions addressed in Rom 14:1–15:13. In short, *Reading Romans Backwards* is McKnight's imaginative (as well as informed) attempt to make sense of Paul's letter to the Romans along the lines of its reception by weak and strong members of Messiah-oriented home fellowships in Rome. Identifying two principal approaches to the interpretation of Romans, soteriological and ecclesial (or social), McKnight adopts an ecclesial approach while emphasizing that these orientations are complementary rather than contradictory. He also acknowledges his indebtedness to two major architects of the new perspective on Paul, James Dunn and N. T. Wright, and his brief introduction reveals his concern to read Romans in counterimperial terms. In his own words, "Paul's lived theology is about Peace in the empire, and it is a radical alternative to Rome's famous *Pax Romana*" (xiv).

Against more traditional interpretations, in which Rom 12–16 is construed as the practical application of Paul's theology set out in earlier chapters or as a series of moral imperatives grounded in earlier theological indicatives, McKnight sees Rom 1–11 as providing the rationale

1. Baylor University Press has also published an accompanying study guide written by Becky Castle Miller, *Teaching Romans Backwards*.

for the praxis or “lived theology” promoted in the final five chapters of Paul’s letter. As a result, he begins his book by focusing in part 1 on key features of Rom 12–16. He then turns his attention in part 2 to Rom 9–11, after which he returns to the beginning of Romans and in parts 3 and 4 moves forward through Rom 1–4 and 5–8, respectively. Within each of the four parts of his book, McKnight’s chapters are relatively brief, focusing on specific features and reflecting on their relevance for reading Romans as received by the letter’s initial audience(s). This review therefore comments on select facets of the four principal parts of McKnight’s discussion rather than summarizing all twenty-one chapters of his book.

In part 1, “A Community Needing Peace,” McKnight focuses first on Phoebe as the likely deliverer of Paul’s letter to Roman believers, then on what may be inferred about various house churches in Rome, including the presence of several prominent women leaders and on what may be discerned from Rom 14:1–15:13 about the respective identities of those labeled weak and strong among these house churches. McKnight adopts and defends the view that the weak is a group of predominantly Jewish believers and the strong a predominantly non-Jewish group. “Lived theology for the Weak means Torah observance; for the Strong it means liberty” (20). Correspondingly, the weak judge the strong, whereas the strong disdain the weak. Although Paul’s own convictions seem to align with those of the strong, he does not exhort the weak to follow suit; rather, despite their seemingly intractable differences, he urges mutual welcome of one another irrespective of such differences.

After briefly proposing that Rom 13:1–7 on obedience to ruling authorities and taxpaying is probably explained by Paul’s awareness that “the Weak were tempted to resist taxes paid to Rome on the basis of their zealotry tradition” (25), McKnight devotes most of the rest of part 1 to elaborating various aspects of “Christoformity,” his term for the process of continual conformity to Jesus Messiah. Ruminating on texts from Rom 12–16, McKnight addresses three key dimensions of Christoformity at the heart of Paul’s lived theology: an embodied God orientation; a body-of-Christ orientation; and a public orientation. The first of these relates to sacrifice as reconfigured in Rom 12:1–2 and prayer as illustrated in the benedictions of 15:13 and 16:20, 25–27. As embodied within the community of faith, however, an orientation toward God is also a body-of-Christ orientation, which McKnight elaborates with reference to six marks of Christoformity: body life, especially the practice of gifts of the Spirit for the mutual benefit of all within the body of Christ, both weak and strong; generosity, most tangibly represented in Paul’s collection for fellow believers in Judea as an expression of unity and mutual interdependence within the body of Christ; peace and unity, especially between the weak and the strong within the body of Christ but also between that “alternative body politic” in Rome and Rome itself; tolerance, albeit directed by various other-oriented guidelines; and welcome, especially by both weak and strong within the body of Christ to shared hospitality. McKnight’s chapter on the public orientation of Christoformity returns to Rom 13:1–7, understood within the literary context of 12:14–13:10 and the historical context of taxation pressures that may have fomented the prospect of revolt, especially among the weak. Part 1 of this book ends with McKnight’s brief observations on eschatological ethics as articulated in Rom

13:11–14, which encourages Christofornity through the image of “wearing” the Lord Jesus Messiah.

Part 2, on Romans 9–11, is titled “A Narrative Leading to Peace” and comprises three chapters. Chapter 10 opens by restating Paul’s central concern for peace at the heart of the Roman Empire, continues by reviewing the main contextual features that inform McKnight’s interpretation of Romans, then presses forward by identifying five topics basic to the surprising story of Israel that Paul tells in Rom 9–11. The five topics briefly surveyed are: principal persons from Israel’s history named by Paul; narrative comparisons between Paul’s reconfigured story of Israel and those of other Jewish storytellers; decisive events from Israel’s history; scriptural texts cited by Paul; and the multiple questions Paul poses within this section of his letter.

The next two chapters of part 2 provide a running thematic commentary on Rom 9–11, with two principal audiences in mind. Taking his cue from Rom 11:13, where Paul explicitly addresses non-Israelites (gentiles), McKnight maintains that 9:1–11:10 is addressed to the weak, whereas 11:11–36 is addressed to the strong. To the weak, Paul writes words of comfort that they belong among God’s elect who can count on divine covenantal faithfulness, but he also encourages them to recognize that God’s saving work in the world has always been surprising, especially when perceived through the prism of (faith in) Messiah Jesus. “To the Strong,” according to McKnight, “Paul says God is faithful to Israel both in including gentiles and in promising a future redemption for Israel” (88). What Paul writes to weak and strong rebuts divisive assumptions and convictions on both sides with a view to promoting peaceable rapport and mutual respect.

Part 3, “A Torah That Disrupts Peace,” turns back to the beginning of Romans, reminding readers yet again of the historical context governing his reading of Paul’s letter, especially the tense social dynamic between the weak and the strong among Christ followers in Rome. Indeed, in the initial chapter of this section on key features of Paul’s letter opening (Rom 1:1–17), McKnight glosses a key phrase as follows: “For Paul, the ‘obedience of faith’ in 1:5 is about the Strong disavowing their power to welcome and empower the Weak (14:1; 15:1), just as it is about the Weak ceasing to think their elective privilege demands that the Strong assume Torah observance (14:10)” (95).

In the remaining chapters of part 3, McKnight develops the notion, grounded in the rhetoric of Rom 1–2 and its resonances with Wis 13–14, that the first four chapters of Romans are directed primarily to the weak—torah-observant Jewish believers who stand in judgment of other believers, especially non-Israelites, who are either not among the historically elect people of God or not torah-observant or neither—and also address three basic questions: “the question about Jewish election, privilege, and priority (3:1–20); the question about boasting (3:27–31); and, the biggest of all, the question about Abraham and faith (4:1–25)” (105; see also 115). This conceptualization of Paul’s primary audience and of the principal questions addressed in the opening section of his letter shapes McKnight’s discussion of Rom 1–4 in part 3 of his book. Along the way, he makes

helpful observations about divine judgment of conduct, Israel's deeply ingrained sense of divine election and (hence) advantage, the parenthetical place of 3:21–26 in Paul's line of argument, the righteousness of God as both attribute and gift (see also 164–65), and boasting, both as culturally conventional in Paul's day and also as premised on Israelite advantage based on election.

“A Spirit Creating Peace,” the fourth and final part of McKnight's “backward reading” of Romans, examines Rom 5–8 in three chapters aligned with perceived “modes of conversation” within this section of Paul's letter: generic sections addressed to “all”; “you” and “we” sections; and the sustained “I section” of 7:7–25 (143). Noting the rarity of biblical citations in Rom 5–8, in marked contrast with the preceding and succeeding sections, and building on his interpretive judgment that Rom 1–4 is Paul's rebuttal of the viewpoint of the weak, McKnight characterizes the second main section of Romans as Paul's “solution to the problem of tension between the Strong and the Weak in the Roman house churches” (142).

McKnight's first chapter in part 4 focuses on Rom 5:12–21 and 8:1–8. Here he offers noteworthy observations on key features of Paul's “comprehensive cosmic vision” (144), including the supra-personal agency of grace, sin, flesh, torah, death, and life, helpfully explicated with reference to emergence theory (145). His next chapter examines two series of passages within Rom 5–8, “you passages” (6:11–23; 8:9–15) and “we passages” (5:1–11; 6:1–10; 7:1–6; 8:16–17, 18–39). Aware that one cannot extrapolate from personal pronouns in Romans to specific factions in Paul's Roman audience, McKnight nevertheless considers that the two “you passages” are addressed to the weak and that the “we passages” are directed predominantly to the strong. The bulk of this chapter explores six themes found within the “we passages”: (1) the former captive condition of all humanity; (2) God's gracious rescue operation in the Messiah; (3) the divine gift itself, incongruous and inseparable from its benefits; (4) new life enabled by God's gracious gift, beginning in baptism and empowered by the Holy Spirit; (5) human participation in this gift through baptism, through faith, hope, and love, and through Spirit-empowered transformation; and (6) the promised future in the Messiah, which already has a foothold in the present. Part 4 ends with a relatively brief chapter on the “I” of 7:7–25, whom McKnight identifies as “someone exploring transformation through the Torah but fails miserably at observing the Torah” (172). In his view, Paul's purpose in this heavily disputed passage was to circumscribe the historic but also time-bound role of the torah so as to demonstrate that new life in the Messiah cannot be the end result of torah observance.

In a brief conclusion, McKnight proffers several reminders of what is necessary to read Romans well. Among these, perhaps the most important (for McKnight) is that the entirety of Paul's letter must be read in light of contextual features gleaned from Rom 14–15. Largely on the basis of such features, he profiles the weak and strong factions among Roman Christ followers, which he deems needful to read Romans well—as situational, pastoral, ecclesial, *lived* theology.

Since *Reading Romans Backwards* has received strong endorsement from several Pauline scholars, perhaps the first point to make in response to McKnight's interpretation of Romans is that the section of this letter central to his reading scenario, 14:1–15:13, explicitly discloses little about weak and strong members within Paul's Roman audience. At one point, McKnight describes his backward reading of Paul's letter as "a heuristic exploration of what Romans looks like from the other end" (173). This is fair enough, but one wonders whether McKnight's frequently repeated and incrementally expanded inferences based on Rom 14:1–15:13 and elsewhere are not overspecified. At another point, McKnight goes so far as to assert, "At Romans 11:13, Paul makes it clear he's speaking to the Strong" (81), whereas what is actually clear is that an interpreter has allowed his contextual reading lens to color Paul's wording at this point in his letter, where he speaks directly to *gentiles* (those from nations other than Israel). Since, according to McKnight's description of the weak and the strong, the weak may include some non-Jews sympathetic to the theo-logic of torah-observant Jewish Christians and the strong may include some Jewish Christians with views comparable to Paul's own, one also wonders whether explicit references to Israelites and non-Israelites (*gentiles*) can be neatly identified with the weak and strong factions addressed in Rom 14–15. At times McKnight is not as careful as he might be about distinguishing between the weak and the strong, and his inclusion among the weak of Jewish Christians inclined to resist Roman taxation on the basis of an Israelite tradition of zealotry is an inferential stretch. How far, then, should one follow McKnight in reading certain parts of Romans as addressed to the weak and others as addressed to the strong? Paul's intended audience in various parts of Romans is probably not so clearly differentiated.

McKnight is also inclined to overstatement on the difference between his reading of Romans and more traditional interpretations of Romans. Introducing his book, he writes: "Romans 12–16 is lived theology, and Romans 1–11 is written to prop up that lived theology. Romans 12–16 is not the application of Paul's theology, nor is Romans a classic example of the indicative leading to the imperative. What Paul had in focus was the lack of praxis, the lack of lived theology, the lack of peace in Rome, and he wrote Romans both to urge a new kind of lived theology (12–16) and to offer a rationale (1–11) for that praxis" (xiv). No doubt some twenty-first-century readers of Romans need to be advised or reminded that Paul was not writing abstract theology, an apparent bogeyman for McKnight, but one wonders whether Paul would have credited McKnight's characterization of the relation between the first three and final sections of his letter more highly than those McKnight finds wrongheaded. In an endnote to chapter 7, McKnight even enunciates: "One can tease out the theological substance of Rom 1–11 in chapters 12–16 by inference from the lived theology" (186). In light of how Paul reasons in his letters, however, methinks McKnight doth maintain too much. Better is this succinct statement: "All of Romans is in dialectical relationship" (27).

Despite these reservations, *Reading Romans Backwards* is innovative, imaginative, and illuminating. Especially noteworthy is McKnight's emphasis throughout on peace as a core theological and social

concern of Paul in Romans. In this respect, he reinforces Klaus Haacker's conception of Romans as a holistic "Friedensmemorandum," albeit without reference to Haacker himself.

Comparable in ways to *Reading Romans Backwards* is *Romans Disarmed: Resisting Empire, Demanding Justice*, by Sylvia Keesmaat and Brian Walsh (Brazos, 2019). Both volumes are grounded in recent Pauline scholarship, especially the "new perspective and beyond" trajectory; both read Paul backward, albeit much more in Richard Hays's intertextual sense by Keesmaat and Walsh; both envisage Paul's soteriology in holistic rather than in individualistic terms; both adopt a counterimperial interpretive stance; both foreground Paul's concern for peace with justice against the backdrop of the *pax Romana*; both are creative and imaginative, although in rather different ways; and both compose strongly contextual readings of Romans, although in this respect Keesmaat and Walsh's "double discernment" (of both the original context and the contexts of current readers) is more explicit about the meaning(s) of Romans for today. *Reading Romans Backwards* is instructive and thought-provoking; time permitting, perusing *Reading Romans Backwards* alongside *Romans Disarmed* is to find oneself drawn into a compelling conversation that attests to the abiding appeal and, indeed, relevance of Paul's letter to the Romans.