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978-0-521-03664-1 - The Strong and the Weak: Romans 14.1-15.13 in Context

Mark Reasoner

Excerpt

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**“STRONG” AND “WEAK” IN ROMANS:
PAST PORTRAITS AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Le chap. XIV soulève une question très difficile: *Quels sont les faibles que les forts doivent ménager?* M.-J. Lagrange¹

Romans challenges its readers with a problem. As a letter written to a church Paul had never visited (Rom. 1.13; 15.22–24) it causes those who read it today to wonder if the letter is a general summary of doctrine, or a memorandum addressing specific needs in the Roman church.² In its selection and treatment of topics, is Romans a general treatise constructed from Paul’s past interactions with churches, or is it focused on the situation within the Christian community of Rome? Donfried has effectively presented this difference in terms of the history of scholarship,³ but perhaps some interpretive examples will help to sharpen the question. For this question of the nature of Romans, general versus specific, abstract versus occasional,⁴ affects how the letter is understood.

For example, Paul presents his gospel as containing the message of God’s righteousness that is grasped by faith (1.17). Is this actually the theme of Paul’s letter (and even the center of his theology), or simply the frame in which Paul places his message when writing to Roman people, who valued *iustitia* and *fides*?

Another example can be found in a consideration of Rom.

¹ M.-J. Lagrange, *Saint Paul: Épître aux Romains* (4th ed.; Ebib; Paris: Gabalda, 1931), 335.

² For the former option, Philipp Melancthon’s description of Romans as a *doctrinae christianae compendium* is representative, *Loci communes*, 1521 (ed. R. Stupperich; Werke in Auswahl 2.1; Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1952), 7. For the latter option, see K. Haacker, “Der Römerbrief als Friedensmemorandum,” *NTS* 36 (1990) 25–41.

³ K. P. Donfried, “False Presuppositions in the Study of Romans,” *The Romans Debate* (ed. K. P. Donfried; rev. ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 102–103.

⁴ To be sure, we can also speak of an occasion in Paul’s own experience that prompted the letter (R. J. Karris, “The Occasion of Romans: A Response to Professor Donfried,” in Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, 127). I shall consider that in chapter 11 below.

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13.1–7. Did Paul intend his directives on obeying the government to be the definitive statement on the Christian's relationship to civil authority?⁵ Or are Paul's words meant to prescribe Christian behavior in relation to a specific government at a specific time in history?⁶

This question of the focus of the letter is particularly pressing in Paul's section on the "strong" and the "weak," identified in the next chapter as extending from Rom. 14.1 through 15.13. In this part of Romans, it seems that Paul knows of two groups within the Roman church at odds with one another. At the same time, he has not been to Rome (Rom. 1.13) and we notice that the text bears real similarities to 1 Cor. 8–10,⁷ which describes a food-related controversy in another Christian community. Is Paul's section on "strong" and "weak" addressed to two groups actually scorning and judging each other in Rome? Or is this section modeled after 1 Cor. 8–10, and simply an hypothetical case study in Paul's letter?⁸ What makes this section of Romans especially exciting is that the question regarding the occasional nature of the letter intersects in this passage with another pressing question: Just how Jewish- and Torah-friendly is Paul in this letter?

Answers to our questions about this part of Romans will help to clarify what part this section of Romans plays in the context of the whole letter. These answers may also help us understand more clearly how this section of Romans fits into the context of first-century Rome and its believing communities. Both contexts are of compelling interest, since the letter to the Romans has been accorded first place in the Pauline canon,⁹ and since it was Roman Christianity that became normative for the Western church.

This monograph goes beyond the limited number of pages that Romans commentators can spend on this part of the letter. The last book written on this topic was written over a generation ago,¹⁰ and while some recent monographs and articles include material on the

⁵ See H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (trans. J. R. de Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 320–23.

⁶ See N. Elliott, *Liberating Paul: The Justice of God and the Politics of the Apostle*, BLib (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1994), 217–26.

⁷ I use 1 Cor. 8–10 to designate the discussion in 1 Corinthians on meat offered to idols. Its precise parameters are 1 Cor. 8.1–13; 10.14–11.1.

⁸ See R. J. Karris, "Romans 14:1–15:13 and the Occasion of Romans," in Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, 65–84.

⁹ Jerome, "Prologus in epistulis Pauli apostoli," lines 27–35.

¹⁰ M. Rauer, *Die "Schwachen" in Korinth und Rom nach den Paulusbriefen* (BibS [F] 21.2–3; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1923).

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“strong” and the “weak” in Rome,¹¹ no monograph has been published in English on this topic in this century.

This book does not simply rehash what commentators have said, sifting through various proposals to find probable answers. While the work is done in conversation with those who have written and are writing on Romans, I examine the text with concepts and comparative texts that hitherto have not been applied to the study of “strong” and “weak” in Romans.

But it is not as though no valuable work had been done before. Indeed, it may be helpful to place this study within the flow of those who have studied and written on “strong” and “weak” in Romans. What follows is a brief survey of past work on this topic, to trace the contours of past discussion on the “strong” and “weak” in Romans, before I identify what is new in this study. Figure 1 outlines the survey to follow.

Since the time of Origen, the interpretation of “strong” and “weak” in Romans has been a controversy in its own right. While it is not necessary here to repeat the surveys of research done by Rauer,¹² Nababan,¹³ and Schneider,¹⁴ I set out the landmarks of the various positions in order to establish the background for an investigation of the problems. Relevant works on Romans that have appeared since 1988 are included under headings of their authors’ names and presented within the appropriate category on “strong” and “weak.”

The investigations may first be categorized on the basis of one’s

¹¹ Karris, “Occasion”; P. S. Minear, *The Obedience of Faith: The Purposes of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans* (SBT 2.19; Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1971); A. E. S. Nababan, “Bekenntnis und Mission in Römer 14 und 15: Eine exegetische Untersuchung” (D.Theol. dissertation, University of Heidelberg, 1962); M. D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul’s Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 85–165; N. Schneider, “Die ‘Schwachen’ in der christlichen Gemeinde Roms: Eine historisch-exegetische Untersuchung zu Röm 14, 1–15, 13” (D.Theol. dissertation, Kirchliche Hochschule Wuppertal, 1989); F. Watson, “The Two Roman Congregations: Romans 14:1–15:13,” in Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, 203–15; F. Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles* (SNTSMS 56; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 88–98.

¹² In his chapter “Die Frage in der älteren Exegese,” Rauer surveys interpretations of the problem from Augustine through J. A. Bengel (*Die ‘Schwachen,’* 108–20). He catalogs in detail scholars’ views on the problem from the nineteenth century through his own time in his next chapter, “Die zugrunde liegenden Anschauungen,” 121–69.

¹³ A. E. S. Nababan describes the history of research from F. C. Bauer to his own time in his dissertation “Bekenntnis und Mission,” 9–25.

¹⁴ The preceding sixty years of research are surveyed and categorized in Schneider, “Die ‘Schwachen,’” 8–49.

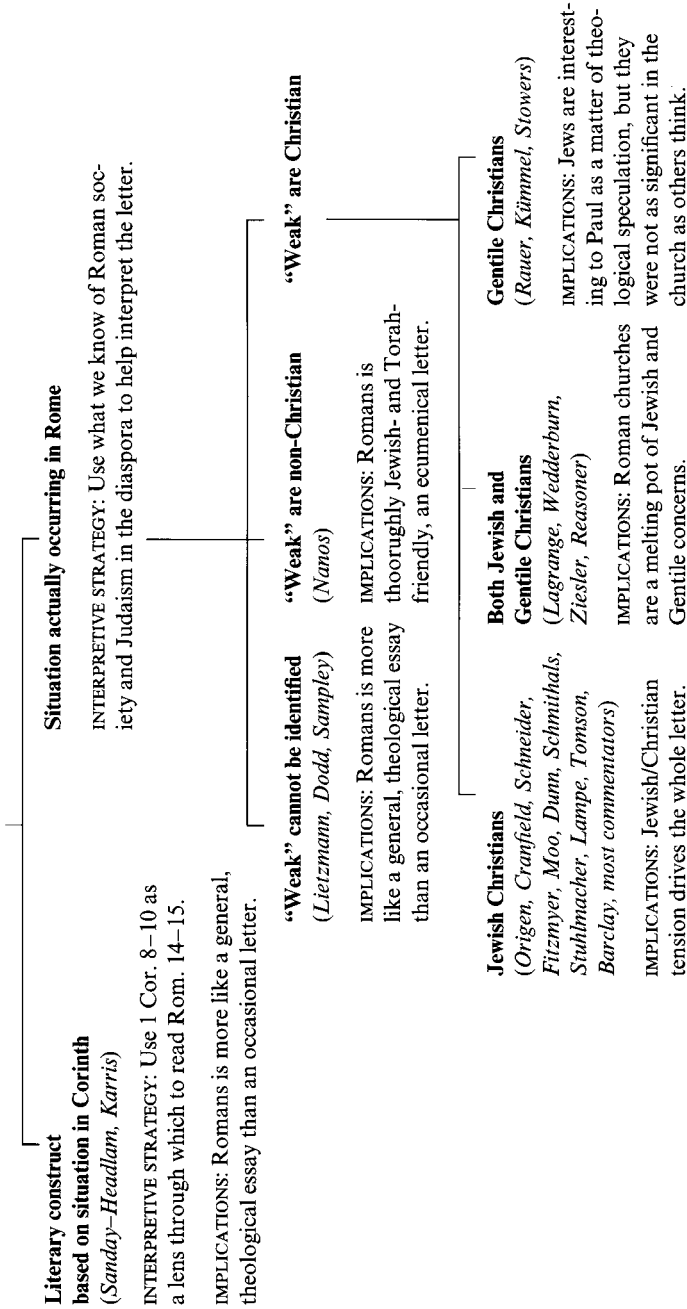


Figure 1 Romans 14.1–15.13: interpretive options

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understanding of the text’s relationship to the historical situation in Rome. While the majority of scholars do see an actual situation reflected in Rom. 14.1–15.13, some think that the similarities with 1 Cor. 8–10 indicate that Paul has written to Rome with no historical referent in mind except the situation of the Corinthian church.

“Weak” are a literary construct based on situation in Corinth

Those who see the situation in the text as related only to the situation described in 1 Cor. 8–10 may be represented by Sanday and Headlam’s commentary. They write, “When St. Paul says in ver. 2 ‘the weak man eateth vegetables,’ he does not mean that there is a special sect of vegetarians in Rome; but he takes a typical instance of excessive scrupulousness.”¹⁵ Their basic position is that the argument lacks specific reference and can only have been written on the basis of Paul’s past experience, rather than from his knowledge of conditions in the Roman church. Leenhardt essentially approaches 14.1–15.13 in this way as well.¹⁶

A more recent expression of this position may be found in Robert J. Karris’s essay, “Romans 14.1–15.13 and the Occasion of Romans.”¹⁷ Karris argues that since the history-of-religions view is bankrupt and parallels can be identified between Rom. 14.1–15.13 and 1 Cor. 8–10, the text in Romans must have been constructed on the analogy of the situation in Corinth, with no reference to specific groups in the Roman church. This position of course has significant implications for how one reads the letter as a whole, since Rom. 14.1–15.13 is usually taken as evidence of the letter’s occasional nature.¹⁸

In the former category, investigations usually result in an identification of the “weak” practices and attitudes either with Jewish or pagan¹⁹ forms of abstinence and observance of days that were

¹⁵ *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (13th ed.; ICC 45; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911), 401–402.

¹⁶ F. J. Leenhardt, *The Epistle to the Romans: A Commentary* (trans. H. Knight; London: Lutterworth, 1961), 346.

¹⁷ Donfried, *The Romans Debate*, 65–84.

¹⁸ Cf. the range of occasions or motives suggested for Romans that are listed in Haacker, “Der Römerbrief als Friedensmemorandum,” 25–29.

¹⁹ The dichotomy “pagan or Jewish” is not without problems, given the syncretistic nature of Hellenistic Judaism in the diaspora. See J. Z. Smith, “Wisdom and Apocalyptic,” in *Map Is Not Territory* (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 87. “Pagan or Jewish” is

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purportedly occurring in Rome. Most numerous in the history of exegesis are those interpretations which see the “weak” as motivated by concerns related to Jewish-Christian observance of Mosaic law.

“Weak” are Jewish believers

Origen considered the “weak” to be Jewish Christians in Rome who distinguished themselves by their concern for Torah.

Quod potest quidem videri dictum ad eos qui ex gentibus crediderunt, extollentes se in libertatem fidei, quia nihil commune aut immundum esse crederent adversum eos qui ex circumcissione crediderunt, observantes adhuc secundum traditionem legis ciborum differentiam: ut eos reprimere videatur et monere ne insultent eis quibus longa consuetudo in observandis cibus discretionem adhuc aliquam et cunctationem movebat.

Thus one can see that this is addressed to those who believed from the Gentiles, elevating themselves in the freedom of faith, since they believed nothing to be common or unclean, as opposed to those who believed from the circumcision, who still observed a differentiation among foods according to the tradition of the law. So he seems to restrain them and warn them not to insult those who through long habit in observing discrimination up to now in foods were motivated by some reservation.²⁰

At a later point in his commentary, on 14.16–17, Origen does suggest Jewish or Encratite practice as forming the background of the “weak,” thus raising the possibility that Nanos has now developed, that the “weak” are Jews who do not believe in Jesus.²¹

Following Origen in the basic identification of Jewish concerns behind the “weak” abstinence of believers within the Roman churches is Chrysostom.²² Greek fathers known for following

used here to designate the general orientation behind the practices and attitudes in question.

²⁰ Origen, *Commentaria in epistolam beati Pauli ad Romanos* 9.35 (PG 14:1234–35).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10.1 (PG 14:1249). See discussion on Nanos later in this chapter.

²² John Chrysostom, *Homiliae XXXII in epistolam ad Romanos* 25.1 (PG 60:627).

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Chrysostom do so here as well, for example, Theodoret.²³ John Damascene, who is in the same interpretive tradition, may be cited as representative.

Πολλοὶ τῶν ἐξ Ἰουδαίων πεπιστευκότων. ἔτι τῆ τοῦ νόμου κατεχόμενοι συνειδήσει μετὰ τὴν πίστιν, τῶν βρωμάτων ἐφύλαττον τὴν παρατήρησιν, οὐπω θαρροῦντες τέλειον ἀποστήναι τοῦ νόμου, εἶτα ὥστε μὴ γενέσθαι εὐφώρατοι τῶν χοιρίων ἀπεχόμενοι μόνον, πάντων ἐξῆς ἀπέιχοντο κρεῶν, καὶ ἥσθιον λάχανα, ἵνα νηστεία μᾶλλον εἶναι δοκῆ, ἀλλὰ μὴ νόμου παρατήρησις.

Many from among the Jews had believed. But they still held in conscience to the law after faith; they kept the observance of foods, not yet having complete confidence to stand away from the law, for since it would not be easy to detect those who abstained only from pork, they therefore abstained from all meats, and ate vegetables, that it would rather appear to be a fast, though this was not the observance of the law.²⁴

In more recent times this view has been held by Melancthon,²⁵ J. J. Wettstein,²⁶ Godet,²⁷ Riggenbach,²⁸ Kühn,²⁹ Michel,³⁰ Jewett,³¹

²³ *Interpretatio epistolae ad Romanos* 140 (PG 82:200).

²⁴ Ἐκ τῆς καθόλου ἐρμηνείας Ἰωάννου τοῦ Χρυσσοστόμου ἐκλογαὶ ἐκλεγεῖσαι, 51 (PG 95:549).

²⁵ P. Melancthon, *Annotationes in epistulam Pauli ad Romanos et ad Corinthios, in Opera quae supersunt omnia* (Vol. XV; ed. C. G. Bretschneider; Halis Saxonum: C. A. Schwetschke and Son, 1848; reprint ed., New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1963), cols. 1024–28.

²⁶ J. J. Wettstein, Ἡ Καινὴ Διαθήκη *Novum Testamentum graecum*, Vol. II: *Continens epistolas Pauli* (Amsterdam: Ex officina Dommeriana, 1752; reprint ed., Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1962), 91 (on Rom. 14.22).

²⁷ F. Godet, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (trans. A. Cusin and T. W. Chambers; New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 467.

²⁸ E. Riggenbach, “Die Starken und Schwachen in der römischen Gemeinde,” *TSK* 66 (1893) 675–76.

²⁹ E. Kühn, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1913), 444–46.

³⁰ O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (4th ed.; KEK 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966), 334.

³¹ R. Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms: A Study of their Use in Conflict Settings* (AGJU 10; Leiden: Brill, 1971), 42–46; R. Jewett, “The Law and the Coexistence of Jews and Gentiles in Romans,” *Interp.* 39 (1985) 354.

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Käsemann,³² Cranfield,³³ Wilckens,³⁴ and Watson.³⁵ The basic arguments for a Jewish background to “weak” abstinence are parallels for Jewish abstinence,³⁶ Paul’s use of *κοινος* in 14.14,³⁷ and the general Jew versus Gentile tension that energizes much of the letter.³⁸ I can illustrate this position, that Jewish Christians represent the “weak” and Gentile Christians represent the “strong,” from more recent publications on Romans,³⁹ presented in the order in which they have appeared.

J. D. G. Dunn⁴⁰

Dunn notes the absence of the terms *εἰδωλόθυτα*, *συνείδησις*, and *γνώσις* in this section of Romans, along with its description of a clean/unclean distinction (not found in 1 Corinthians), as evidence of a difference in reference from the situation depicted in 1 Cor. 8–10.⁴¹ After acknowledging neo-Pythagorean parallels to the meat and wine abstinence found in Rom. 14.1–15.13, he states that “here Paul must have at least the dietary rules of Jews and Jewish Christians in view, whatever other practices can be included in its sweep.”⁴² Dunn supports this conclusion with three observations.⁴³ First, the orientation of the letter around the Jew versus Gentile

³² E. Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 368–69.

³³ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 690–97.

³⁴ U. Wilckens, *Der Brief an die Römer* (EKKNT 6; 3 vols.; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1982), III.109–15.

³⁵ Watson, *Paul, Judaism and the Gentiles*, 94–98.

³⁶ These include Dan. 1.8, 10–16; Josephus, *Vita* 13–14; and Hegesippus’ testimony (according to Eusebius, *H.E.* 2.23.5) about the abstinence of James.

³⁷ Examples of the word’s occurrence in discussions of purity issues outside of a Jewish context have not been found.

³⁸ See Rom. 1.16; 3.9–31; 9–11; 15.9–12.

³⁹ Christoph Heil, *Die Ablehnung der Speisegebote durch Paulus* (BBB 96; Weinheim/Berlin: Beltz Athenäum, 1994), 260–65, identifies the “weak” as Jewish Christians. He is not featured in the survey here, since the focus of his monograph prevents him from contributing significantly to the arguments regarding the identity of the “weak.”

⁴⁰ J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC 38B; Dallas: Word, 1988).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 795. The absence of these terms and concepts related to them is significant, for they play a crucial role in the 1 Cor. 8–10 passage. On *εἰδωλόθυτα*, see 1 Cor. 8.1, 4, 7, 10; 10.19. On *συνείδησις*, see 1 Cor. 8.7, 10, 12; 10.25, 27–29. On *γνώσις*, see 1 Cor. 8.1, 7, 10–11.

⁴² Dunn, *Romans*, 799–800.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 800 for the following arguments.

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theme in chapters 1–11 and the return to this theme in 15.7–13 make a similar background probable here. Second, the use of *καθαρός* and *κοινός* in 14.14, 20 fits with Jewish concerns on purity issues. Third, he adduces evidence from Hellenistic authors⁴⁴ to show that dietary concerns continued to be a central mark of identification for diaspora Jews.

He relates the controversy, as others have done,⁴⁵ to the return of Jews to Rome after Claudius’ ban of 49 CE was lifted. Perhaps fewer facilities were available for providing kosher meat or Jewish Christians did not want to call attention to their Jewish orientation by asking for correctly slaughtered meat.⁴⁶ He concludes his identification of the “weak” by recognizing that not everyone in the Roman church may have been included in either the designation “strong” or “weak”; we simply do not know the proportions of the controversy.⁴⁷

Walter Schmithals⁴⁸

Schmithals eliminates explanations of pagan asceticism or sectarian (and vegetarian) Judaism as the background for the abstinence mentioned in Rom. 14.1–15.13.⁴⁹ Instead he chooses to see the abstinence as based on concern for contamination from *εἰδωλόματα*, and sees 1 Cor. 8.1–13; 10.14–11.1 and Col. 2.16–23 as close parallels to Paul’s description of an actual situation in Rome.⁵⁰ He explains the obvious difference between the Romans and Corinthians texts first with the generalization that Paul speaks to the Corinthians about a special case of unclean meat, food offered to idols, since they

⁴⁴ Among them are Philo, *Legat.* 361; Plutarch, *Quaest. conv.* 4.5; Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.2; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.98.

⁴⁵ See Wilckens, *Römer* III.95, 113 n. 547 and P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten: Untersuchungen zur Sozialgeschichte* (2nd ed.; WUNT 2.18; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1989), 57 n. 149.

⁴⁶ Dunn, *Romans*, 801.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 802.

⁴⁸ W. Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief: Ein Kommentar* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1988).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 490–91. For him, pagan asceticism is not in view because Pythagoreanism (the only specific form of this asceticism he considers) cannot explain the day observance (14.5); it is not concerned with cultic purity as the Roman “weak” apparently were (14.14); and the “weak” would not be likely to judge “strong” on the basis of pagan ideas. An asceticism from Jewish orthodoxy is denied primarily because meat and wine in themselves were not considered unclean within Judaism.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 491–94. He does not consider the differences between the Corinthians and Colossians texts. Colossians, which he thinks is Pauline (494), does not mention meat, and unlike Corinthians it does mention day observance.

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had asked Paul about that. To the Romans Paul writes more comprehensively about unclean meat.⁵¹ With this explanation it is difficult to understand how exactly the situation in Rome can be said to parallel that of Corinth, for if Paul is writing of unclean meat in general, there are more concerns than simply whether or not it was offered to idols, which is all that is in view in 1 Cor. 8–10.

He then suggests that Paul omits reference to wine abstinence or the observance of days in 1 Cor. 8–10 because they had not asked him about them. The problem in Rome is in principle the same as that in Corinth.⁵² The issue is to be seen in light of Jewish legal prescriptions on diet and day observance, so that the observance of days relates to the Jewish calendar.⁵³

Peter Stuhlmacher⁵⁴

Stuhlmacher also sees the conflict narrated in Rom. 14.1–15.13 as an actual situation resulting from the influx of Jews and Jewish Christians who returned to Rome some time after 49 CE. He considers the “strong” to be Christians of a Pauline sort who emphasized freedom from Torah. He describes the “weak” as Jewish Christians who had a legalistic and ascetic viewpoint. The division between the groups was basically one of ethnic orientation (Jew versus Gentile), although this characterization cannot be absolute.

He relates the controversy back to the apostolic council and decree (Acts 15; Gal. 2.1–11). The controversy in Rome is therefore presented as an unresolved situation arising from the same Jewish versus Gentile tensions within early Christianity. While Stuhlmacher sees the situation in Rome as distinct from that described in 1 Cor. 8–10, he states that Paul argues in the same way in Romans as he did when he addressed the Corinthian problem.

Peter Lampe⁵⁵

Lampe discusses the problem of the “strong” and “weak” in the context of his investigation of the relative numbers of Jews and

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 493–94.⁵² *Ibid.*, 494.⁵³ *Ibid.*, 499.⁵⁴ P. Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an die Römer* (NTD 6; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989). The summary that follows comes from pp. 195–97 of the commentary.⁵⁵ Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (2nd ed.; WUNT 2.18; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1989).