

## Paul and the Resurrection of Israel

The gospel promoted by Paul has for many generations stirred passionate debate. That gospel proclaimed equal salvific access to Jews and gentiles alike. But on what basis? In making sense of such a remarkable step forward in religious history, Jason Staples reexamines texts that have proven thoroughly resistant to easy comprehension. He traces Paul's inclusive theology to a hidden strand of thinking in the earlier story of Israel. Postexilic southern Judah, he argues, did not simply appropriate the identity of the fallen northern kingdom of Israel. Instead, Judah maintained a notion of 'Israel' as referring both to the north *and* the ongoing reality of a broad, pan-Israelite sensibility to which the descendants of both ancient kingdoms belonged. Paul's concomitant belief was that northern Israel's exile meant assimilation among the nations – effectively a people's death – and that its restoration paradoxically required gentile inclusion to resurrect a greater 'Israel' from the dead.

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# Paul and the Resurrection of Israel

*Jews, Former Gentiles, Israelites*

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Cambridge University Press & Assessment  
978-1-009-37676-1 — Paul and the Resurrection of Israel  
Jason A. Staples  
Frontmatter  
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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom  
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,  
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103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,  
a department of the University of Cambridge.

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Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781009376761](http://www.cambridge.org/9781009376761)

DOI: 10.1017/9781009376785

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First published 2024

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ Books Limited, Padstow Cornwall

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

*A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress*

ISBN 978-1-009-37676-1 Hardback

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To my wife, Kari  
And my mother, Brenda  
תמכו בידיו מזה  
אחד ומזה אחד  
ויהי וידיו אמונה  
They supported his hands  
One on one side, one on the other  
So his hands were faithful.  
Exodus 17:12

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## Preface

I often imagine Pauline interpretation as akin to putting together a jigsaw puzzle to best represent the image sketched out by Paul's letters. As I see it, the dominant paradigms for Pauline interpretation have tended to start by putting the "easy" pieces (e.g., "justification by faith") together only to discover that several seemingly extraneous pieces don't seem to fit the reconstructed image at the end. Romans 2 and 9–11 have proven especially difficult to fit into common paradigms of Paul's theology, with some going so far as to suggest that these sections do not in fact represent the apostle's thought or that Paul was simply self-contradictory. But in my experience, when a few pieces remain on the table at the end, it usually means some part of the puzzle has been wrongly put together. I would be hesitant to board an airplane after learning that several pieces from the inside of the engine were still laying on the ground, regardless of reassurances from the airport's mechanic that they simply didn't fit when he was rebuilding the engine.<sup>1</sup> Instead, after discovering the pieces left out by the reconstruction, the only solution is to pull the whole thing apart and start anew beginning by figuring out where the problematic pieces fit and then building around them.

This book represents my attempt to do exactly that. Rather than beginning from consensus paradigms built on the seemingly easier passages and then trying to account for why certain passages fit so poorly, I have started from what are widely regarded as the most difficult and

<sup>1</sup> Will Timmins similarly compares the process to solving a Rubik's cube: "even a single piece which remains out of place betrays the need for a new solution" (*Romans 7 and Christian Identity* [2017], 9).

anomalous sections of the Pauline corpus. The idea is that by establishing the proper places for the most difficult pieces, the rest can more easily snap into place around them. Ultimately, if my argument here is correct, the reason these difficult chapters have fit so poorly with modern reconstructions of Paul's theology is that those modern reconstructions have built on faulty foundational assumptions, resulting in numerous loose ends. In other words, the primary problem in Pauline interpretation has not been what we don't know – it's that much of what we've thought we know isn't so.

If this is indeed the case, once those difficult pieces are properly placed, many other passages will need to be reexamined in light of what Paul is doing in the chapters addressed here. Thus, although this book focuses specifically on Paul's arguments about Israel, Torah, and the gospel in a series of specific passages, it represents an attempt to lay a foundation for a new and more robust paradigm for understanding Paul's letters and gospel proclamation in general. (Although my analysis is limited to the seven undisputed letters, in my judgment the framework proposed in this study applies equally well to the rest of the Pauline corpus.) By the end of the process, my hope is that by establishing a better foundation, a variety of specific insights from previous interpreters may be seen from a different and wider angle revealing more pieces at once, allowing the whole elephant to finally come into view.

Seeing from a wider angle also requires stepping outside the narrow world of Pauline studies, which too often treats the apostle in near isolation or only engages with outside sources as foils against which Paul, the unique and original thinker, is understood. But the Pauline letters involve highly compressed and allusive arguments that assume the readers share a great deal of foundational common knowledge – knowledge modern readers do not tend to share. Arriving late to a conversation makes it easy to misunderstand what is being said until others explain what was said earlier in the discussion, and when reading Paul's letters, we are hearing only one side of a conversation that builds on earlier discussions to which we have no access. Reading the Pauline corpus is therefore akin to trying to understand a meme-heavy exchange on the Internet, potentially inscrutable without shared knowledge of the movies, television, or other popular media reshaped and reapplied in new contexts. I am therefore persuaded that to understand Paul, one must first endeavor to reconstruct that common foundation as much as possible by immersing in the Hebrew Bible/LXX and other source materials from the Second Temple period, preparing to recognize the subtle, complex

nuances embedded in seemingly straightforward statements, the simplicity in what may initially seem hopelessly complex or contradictory.

I endeavored to reconstruct some of that core foundation in *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism* (2021), of which this book serves as a sequel volume. As such, I am approaching Paul not as though he were a wholly original and unique individual disconnected from his temporal and cultural foundation but rather as a distinct representative of early Judaism – itself an exceedingly diverse phenomenon – in the context of the earliest Jesus movement. This book therefore aims to put Paul in conversation with other source material from the Second Temple period while simultaneously using that information to delve deeply into the exegesis of specific Pauline passages.

The result of this approach is that each individual chapter is both a specific, self-contained argument and an important foundation stone for the larger argument of the book. Nevertheless, no single chapter or specific argument is determinative for the larger argument as a whole – one might, for instance, disagree with much of my analysis of Rom 1 or 2 Cor 3 while still agreeing with the larger paradigm as a whole or vice-versa. Consequently, the reader most interested in the larger thesis will have to work through numerous detailed discussions of specific cases, since the larger paradigm I am proposing depends on a cumulative case about how the various pieces of the puzzle fit together. On the other hand, those more interested in my reading of a specific chapter or passage will need to consider the relationship of those specific parts to the comprehensive argument of the book (and in some cases foundational details found in the preceding volume), as the cumulative weight of other passages contributes to the plausibility of such specifics.<sup>2</sup>

In the interest of readability, I have not attempted to represent the full range of scholarship on the passages and subject matter covered in this volume, let alone Pauline studies as a whole, and have instead limited my engagement with previous scholarship to what seemed necessary to the discussion. At an editorial level, I have translated all substantive foreign-language quotes into English, providing the original quotations in corresponding footnotes when that seemed warranted. All translations of ancient materials are my own except where noted. I have also transliterated a few key terms frequently used in the body text (e.g., *Ioudaios*, *ekklēsia*) to make the book more accessible but have otherwise retained

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the similar caveats in Jason A. Staples, *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism* (2021), xiii; and E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (1977), xii.

Greek or Hebrew characters in parenthetical references or footnotes. All citations and abbreviations follow *The SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed., though for economy I have eschewed the long first citation with full publication data in favor of abbreviated title and date, leaving other information to the bibliography, with a few exceptions where more information in context was deemed preferable. Abbreviations not included in the *SBLHS* follow the conventions of their respective fields. All references to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament use the Hebrew versification (“ET” = English translation). Chapter 1, which summarizes the thesis of *The Idea of Israel in Second Temple Judaism*, borrows heavily from that book. Parts of Chapters 5 and 7 include material that has previously appeared in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (“What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’? A Fresh Look at Romans 11:25–27” [2011]) and *Harvard Theological Review* (“Vessels of Wrath and God’s Pathos: Potter/Clay Imagery in Rom 9:20–23” [2022]).

## Acknowledgments

This book began with ideas first formed and put forward in William L. Lyons' 2003 Hebrew Bible Prophets class, and I am profoundly thankful to Bill for all his encouragement and helpful feedback over the past two decades. I am also deeply indebted to my *Doktorvater*, Bart Ehrman, whose support, counsel, and generosity have been invaluable over the past fifteen years. I am also grateful to David Levenson for his training and mentorship when I was at Florida State – it turns out there was indeed work left to do on Paul after all! This book also may never have come to fruition without the early enthusiasm of the late Robert Jewett, who strongly advocated for the project from which this book grew. Bob went out of his way to vouch for the initial insights of a nascent project that departed so significantly from prior paradigms, volunteered to be an outside reader of my dissertation, and carved out time to discuss core concepts in the early stages of my research. He exemplified kindness, gentleness, generosity, and breadth of mind, and he demonstrated how to use senior status and influence to benefit those with less. May his memory be for a blessing.

I am deeply indebted to the generosity of those who read and provided valuable critiques and feedback of various parts of this book at different stages, especially Stephen Carlson, Paul Sloan, Sonya Cronin, David Schroder, Benjamin L. White, Logan Williams, and Isaac Soon. Paula Fredriksen's generous feedback and encouragement over the past decade – even when we have disagreed – have meant a great deal. I also owe gratitude to Eibert Tigchelaar, Joel Marcus, Jodi Magness, Douglas Campbell, Anatheia Portier-Young, David Lambert, Zlatko Pleše, Jonathan Boyarin, and Ross Wagner for their critiques and support

through early stages of this project. Richard Hays, James Crenshaw, and Fr. Ron Olszewski were generous teachers who also influenced this project in one way or another. I am deeply indebted to Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, Kathryn Stoddard, John Marincola, and Francis Cairns, who taught me to read Greek texts and do my own careful lexical work rather than merely trusting a lexicon and regurgitating glosses. In particular, Cairns' offhand comment in a 2005 Aeschylus seminar about the reciprocity inherent to the word χάρις – a small moment I will never forget – significantly impacted my understanding of Paul's gospel. Other long-suffering souls who have tolerated my obsession with this subject and proved especially valuable conversation partners during what must have seemed like an unending project include Jason Combs, T. J. Lang, Nathan Eubank, Isaac Oliver, Michael Barber, James Tabor, Mark Nanos, Scott Hahn, John Kincaid, Mark Goodacre, David Burnett, Matthew Grey, Jim Hayes, Fr. Gregory (Joshua) Edwards, and Tim Cupery.

This book grew out of my PhD dissertation at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I was supported by a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship and a Thomas S. and Helen Borda Royster Dissertation Fellowship. Most of the book was written while in visiting faculty positions at Wake Forest, Duke, and NC State, and I am grateful to colleagues in those departments (Michael Pendlebury and William Adler in particular) and for the beneficence of the library staff at each institution. I am also grateful to my colleagues from Inside Carolina, especially Buck Sanders and Ben Sherman, who understood that this project was a priority and were patient when my output diminished at times in the offseason. Thanks also to the many who helped my wife and I stay afloat after our house fire in 2013 and to Michael G. Scott for help with the management of such a large project. Luis and Liz Marquez also supported this project in more ways than one, and for that I will always be grateful. Thanks also to the full Cambridge University Press team, especially for the patience and encouragement of Beatrice Rehl, whose vision of a two-volume project made this book possible. Two anonymous readers also provided helpful critiques that improved the final product. The deficiencies that remain in this work are of course my own responsibility.

This book is the product of many years of commitment, support, and sacrifice from family. In addition to producing music that helped fuel long hours of writing, my sister Stephanie and brother-in-law Erik have been supportive in a variety of ways. My father, Mark, laid the foundation of how I understand Paul's gospel and remains one of the finest teachers and brightest minds I have ever encountered. He planted and cultivated the

*Acknowledgments*

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seeds that have grown into this book, training me from the beginning to reexamine every tradition and question every interpretation, no matter how firmly established or widely believed, in the quest for truth. His readiness to recognize and admit his own errors and limitations also set a wonderful example of humility. His support has been unwavering over the years, and this book represents his toil as much as mine – it was possible only because I am standing on his shoulders.

Finally, this book is dedicated to the two women whose prodigious efforts and sacrifices made it possible. My mother, Brenda, has sacrificed more to ensure this book would come to fruition than I ever imagined possible. She has given beyond measure, and whatever good comes from this book should be credited to her account. Thank you, mom. My wife, Kari, has truly been my γνήσιος σύζυγος and has shared in the toil throughout the process; her support never wavered even when she knew following this path meant sacrificing luxuries like a consistent paycheck and retirement savings. The making of many books is endless and excessive study is exhausting, but she is more precious than life and her love is stronger than death. I hope one day to be worthy of it. May this book prove a lasting and valuable commemoration of that love.