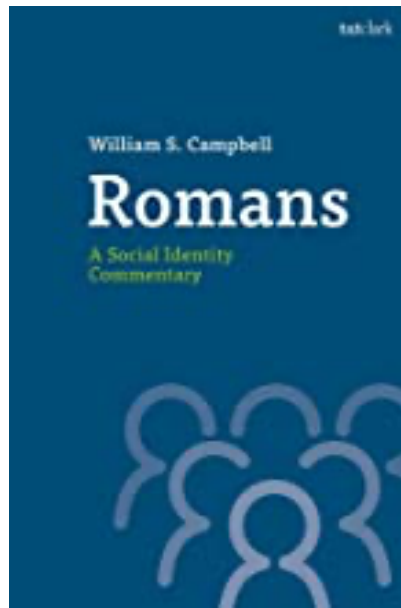


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**William S. Campbell**

***Romans: A Social Identity Commentary***

T&T Clark Social Identity Commentaries on the New Testament

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*Romans: A Social Identity Commentary* is among the first installments of the T&T Clark Social Identity Commentaries on the New Testament series, which focuses on the analysis of New Testament texts using the insights of social identity theory. Social identity theory is a branch of social psychology originally developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and 1980s that addresses the constitution of an individual's self-concept from perceived membership in a social group. In this volume, seasoned Pauline scholar William S. Campbell applies social identity theory to the exegesis of Paul's Letter to the Romans, a text in which group and subgroup dynamics drive much of the discussion.

In a robust introduction, Campbell discusses historical considerations related to the presence and nature of Christ-believing communities in Rome, key aspects of the reception history of Romans over the past fifty years, and considerations related to applying social identity theory to this text. Particularly noteworthy is Campbell's position that Paul distinguished between Jews, who were to live out their devotion to Christ under the torah, and gentile believers, who were to live faithfully to Christ apart from the torah. Furthermore, like Stanley K. Stowers (*A Rereading of Romans*, 1994) and Rafael Rodriguez (*If You Call Yourself a Jew*, 2014), Campbell understands Romans to be addressed only to gentiles. So, Paul's words about the relationship between Jews and gentiles correct gentiles regarding their view of Jews.

Exegetes of Romans have assigned prominence to the major sections (chs. 1–4, 5–8, 9–11, 12–15) differently based on their understanding of Paul’s purpose in writing the letter. Campbell understands chapters 9–11, a section addressing the ongoing relevance of Israel to God’s plan of salvation, to be the core of Paul’s discourse, with chapters 1–8 laying an important rhetorical foundation for this material and chapters 12–15 drawing out the practical implications. Campbell imagines that gentiles in Rome saw themselves as superior to Jews, and Paul is writing to emphasize to those gentiles the continuing importance of Israel to God’s redemptive intentions.

Whereas social identity theory has, at times, emphasized the construction of identity in terms of intergroup conflict, Campbell aligns himself with scholars (especially Marilynn B. Brewer) who present a more complex view in which clearly defined boundaries between groups can potentially facilitate positive intergroup relations, and individuals belonging to multiple groups can produce a sense of diversity among an in-group. Furthermore, Campbell’s analysis is informed by insights from social identity theory about superordinate identity, in which multiple groups can understand themselves within the context of a larger, umbrella identity while still maintaining a strong sense of their subgroup’s distinctiveness (see especially Scott D. Neufeld and Michael T. Schmitt, *Political Psychology* 40 [2019]: 599–616). This is, of course, relevant to Campbell’s view of Jews and gentile believers as two distinct groups that together constitute the people of God according to Romans

In addition to the standard, verse-by-verse commentary, Campbell includes four excursuses on specific topics of interest. The first excursus discusses Paul’s use of diatribal style in Romans, which is a perennial topic of interest in twentieth-century scholarship on this text. Campbell takes Romans to be a letter rather than a diatribe per se but does find Paul making use of diatribal style (speech in character, apostrophe, engagement with rhetorical questions) throughout much of the text. Specifically, he understands Paul to be interacting with hypothetical gentile interlocutors, including a god-fearing gentile who is connected to the synagogue but still honors other gods and a proselyte. Campbell posits that Paul uses this literary device to help him address difficult topics (particularly the topic of Israel) in a context where he does not have clear authority as a church founder to reprimand the letter’s recipients directly. Thus the use of diatribal devices implies no disconnection between Paul’s rhetoric and actual exigencies among his Roman audience.

The second excursus discusses God’s wrath against idolatry in Rom 1:19–32. Campbell argues that Paul agrees with, rather than subverts, traditions of Jewish polemic against gentile idolatry.

The third excursus discusses the background of the language of slavery and domination found so prevalently in Rom 5–8. Campbell understands this material to be rooted in Jewish tradition about the exodus (in which Israel was freed from slavery in Egypt to become slaves to God) and Greco-Roman imperial ideology, as well as the practice of Greco-Roman house slavery.

Important elements of Romans are overlooked when one of these backgrounds is emphasized to the exclusion of the others.

The fourth excursus discusses supersessionism at Rome. Campbell posits that gentile believers in Rome probably had a relationship to the synagogues (and thus to Christ-believing and non-Christ-believing Jews, as well as various categories of non-Christ-believing gentiles) at the time Romans was written. Furthermore, he finds in Romans Paul's encouragement that gentiles continue to participate in synagogal worship, rather than separating and forming their own Christian communities. This latter impulse may well have arisen through the influence of Roman imperial ideology, which would view Jews as one of the Mediterranean world's conquered peoples, and the comparative popularity of the gospel among gentiles as a sign of God's rejection of Israel in favor of Rome. The expulsion of some Jews from Rome in recent memory would have lent itself to this sort of triumphalistic supersessionism. As Campbell understands it, Paul wrote to the Roman gentiles primarily to correct this view.

Campbell arranges his detailed commentary chapter by chapter, with a section for each pericope and subsections for smaller groups of verses. He includes additional subsections to address specific topics of interest, such as mini-excurses within the commentary (e.g., "The Exigency at Rome Illuminated by Deuteronomy 32," which is part of the section on Rom 9:6–13). Each pericope begins with Campbell's translation. Although he does discuss important Greek words and phrases where needed, his focus is less on the Greek text and more on important interpretive issues. He makes parenthetical references to secondary sources and occasionally includes a block quotation. Explanatory footnotes appear sparsely throughout.

Campbell's treatment of this complicated Pauline composition reflects his intellectual acuity, erudition, and insight. Although Campbell has published scholarship on Romans for decades, his thinking is commendably shaped by recent scholarly contributions, and thus this treatment is timely and up to date, as is his bibliography. Not everyone will be convinced of his position on Romans, but this book represents a strong presentation of said position.

To a significant extent, Campbell focuses his verse-by-verse commentary on demonstrating the viability of his particular understanding of the text's audience, occasion, focus, and covenantal content. This means that he emphasizes certain aspects of Romans and avoids addressing others in any detail. For example, Campbell's discussion of Rom 1:19–32 focuses on how this passage reveals to gentiles the relation of Israel's God to the created world, particularly as it pertains to gentile idolatry (in contrast, say, to the view that this passage sets a rhetorical "trap" for Jewish believers who might see themselves as superior to idolatrous gentiles). He makes only the most passing mention of Paul's reference to same-sex sexual relations in 1:26–27, which of course would be a topic of interest to many readers (cf., e.g., *JBL* 138 [2019]: 221–40).

Additionally, one gets the impression that Campbell is forcing certain passages to fit his overall view of Romans, even when this requires ignoring or glossing over inconvenient elements. For example, Paul's claim that "law came in, with the result that the transgression multiplied" (5:20) certainly seems to describe the multiplication of transgression *in Israel* at the inception of the Mosaic law (cf. 5:13–14), and such an understanding would be uncongenial to Campbell's overall reading of Romans. Yet his commentary omits any discussion of this portion of the passage, to say nothing of a convincing alternative interpretation. Likewise, it seems problematic to Campbell's argument that Paul speaks in the first-person plural in 7:5–6 ("When *we* were in the flesh," "now *we* are released from the law," etc.), since this passage is not understood as part of the speech in character that spans 7:7–25. Campbell's explanation is simply that Paul is "speaking hypothetically" about gentiles reading the law (210–11).

Potential readers should note that Campbell's commentary is purely descriptive. It does not include any discussion of normative concerns such as the text's relevance to Christian theology. This is especially significant because his interpretation (especially the implications of his translation of 9:6, "all those from Israel are Israel are they not?") presents nontrivial questions vis-à-vis Christian theological tradition.

Campbell's prose does not present the reader with extensive footnotes, copious quotations of the Greek text, or encyclopedic references to nonbiblical ancient sources. The cleanliness of the prose, together with the relative slenderness of the volume (compared to other detailed treatments of Romans) could give the impression that this is a popular-level commentary. However, Campbell makes frequent passing reference to concepts theoretical, historical-cultural, and exegetical that will not be familiar to nonscholars, and he commonly does this without citing any resources for the benefit of uninitiated readers. Although certain paragraphs will be intelligible to readers below the level of a doctoral student, many likely will not.

Ultimately, this commentary is not for all readers, but every Pauline scholar would do well to spend some time with it. This will be especially worthwhile for those interested in the exegetical work of Stowers, Rodriguez, Runar M. Thorsteinsson, Mark D. Nanos, Kathy Ehrensperger, and J. Brian Tucker, among others.