



# Paul and the Gentile Problem

By Matthew Thiessen

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*Paul and the Gentile Problem* provides a new explanation for the apostle Paul's statements about the Jewish law in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. Paul's arguments against circumcision and the law in Romans 2 and his reading of Genesis 15-21 in Galatians 4:21-31 belong within a stream of Jewish thinking which rejected the possibility that gentiles could undergo circumcision and adopt the Jewish law, thereby becoming Jews. Paul opposes this solution to the gentile problem because he thinks it misunderstands how essentially hopeless the gentile situation remains outside of Christ. The second part of the book moves from Paul's arguments against a gospel that requires gentiles to undergo circumcision and adoption of the Jewish law to his own positive account, based on his reading of the Abraham Narrative, of the way in which Israel's God relates to gentiles. Having received the Spirit (*pneuma*) of Christ, gentiles are incorporated into Christ, who is the singular seed of Abraham, and, therefore, become materially related to Abraham. But this solution raises a question: Why is it so important for Paul that gentiles become seed of Abraham? The argument of this book is that Paul believes that God had made certain promises to Abraham that only those who are his seed could enjoy and that these promises can be summarized as being empowered to live a moral life, inheriting the cosmos, and having the hope of an indestructible life.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Thiessen presents a rich volume in which he offers a systematic understanding of Paul's solution to 'the gentile problem.' This is a bold volume, which certainly provides food for thought for further debates [A] creative and stimulating contribution to the important conversation about the role of the apostle to the nations within his first century context."--*The Enoch Seminar*

"Matthew Thiessen's re-reading of Paul - bold, learned, and comprehensive - presents an apostle compelled by his apocalyptic convictions to reimagine the relationship of the nations to Israel's god, to the patriarch Abraham, and to Abraham's seed, the Christ. Seemingly intractable passages of Galatians and of Romans shift suddenly into sharp focus. With *Paul and the Gentile Problem*, Thiessen moves New Testament scholarship into a new age." --Paula Fredriksen, Distinguished Visiting Professor of Comparative Religion, the Hebrew University, Jerusalem

"Matthew Thiessen demonstrates the implications of reading Paul within Second Temple Judaism; moreover, he eschews the traditional impulse to find something wrong in Judaism to understand Paul. By maintaining a historically responsible reading of Paul, one that identifies his target audience as Christ-following non-Jews, Thiessen delivers on several central issues in Pauline studies, including how Paul defined his non-Jews as Abraham's seed and conceptualized their receipt of pneuma, identifying the so-called Jew in Romans 2, and decoding the enigmatic allegory of Galatians 4. Uniquely illuminating is Thiessen's interpretation of Paul's understanding of the promise to Abraham that his seed would be like the stars." --Mark D. Nanos, co-editor of *Paul within Judaism: Restoring the First-Century Context to the Apostle*

"Drawing on his wide knowledge of ancient Judaism, Thiessen here reframes Paul's theology of his gentile mission, insisting that his polemics are directed only against gentiles attempting the impossible, not against Jews, Judaism, or Jewish practices as such. This combination of fresh thinking and deep research is exactly what we need: it generates many original proposals which are bound to provoke new and important debate." --John Barclay, Lightfoot Professor of Divinity, Durham University

### About the Author

**Matthew Thiessen** received his Ph.D from Duke University in 2010. His first book, *Contesting Conversion*, won the prestigious Manfred Lautenschlaeger Award for Theological Promise (2014). He has also won the Society of Biblical Literature's Regional Scholar Award (2014). He is currently Associate Professor of Religious Studies at McMaster University.

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