Chapter eight

With the grain of the Universe:
History and Hermeneutics in Wisdom 10–19 and Romans 9–11

If the Bible is right, this world’s gonna explode
—Bob Dylan

The author of Wisdom of Solomon and the Paul of Romans read the same
texts, yet they read them differently.¹ This is both an introduction to this
chapter and an explanation of the wide continuity and deep discontinuity
that characterised the conversation between Paul and Wisdom imagined
in the previous two: the recurrent points of contact are not coincidences
of formal convergence but products of a shared textual inheritance; the
recurrent points of debate are not accidental material divergences but
products of different readings. In other words, what connects Paul and
Wisdom is a canon—they read the same texts—what separates them is a
hermeneutic—they read them differently.²

The conversation between the author of Wisdom and Paul has thus
far been marked by a movement from dialogue to debate. Wisdom and
Paul are both concerned with the bipartite structuring of humanity, but
whereas Wisdom works to reinforce the Jew/Gentile distinction Paul
attempts to reduce that anthropological fraction to a single denomina-
tor, homo peccator (chapter six). Wisdom and Paul both use the words
χάρις and δικαιοσύνη, but they deploy them in incommensurable theologi-
cal grammars—Wisdom to describe and guarantee the moral order, Paul
to describe the event that justifies the ungodly (chapter seven). In both

¹ This is an adaption of Francis Watson’s methodological observation: ‘Paul and his
fellow-Jews read the same texts, yet read them differently’ (Paul and the Hermeneutics of

² Watson notes that ‘In Romans 3.1–2, Paul views the reception, preservation and
propagation of the texts of scripture as the primary reason to reaffirm the unique sig-
nificance of Jewishness’ and argues that ‘Paul remains Jewish as he argues [with other
Jews] . . . not because many other Jews were saying the same thing (they were not), but
because Paul . . . is concerned wholly with intra-Jewish issues of scriptural interpretation
and hermeneutics’ (Hermeneutics, ix, 27). Cf. J.A. Linebaugh, ‘Paul’s (Re)Reading of Israe1’s
‘Paul’s Jewish identity is hermeneutically significant because, as a Jew, his theology is
hermeneutical’.
cases, it was suggested that the essential fault-line is christological: Paul reinterprets the human situation in the shadow of the cross and deduces a definition grace and righteousness from Jesus' single and saving history. What was underemphasised in those chapters, however, is that Paul's christologically-determined anthropology and theological vocabulary come to expression in and as interpretations of Israel's scripture: the unveiling of the single, sinful human under the Jew/Gentile divide (Rom 3.9) is announced in the voice of the psalmists, sages and prophets (Rom 3.10–18), and the redefining of righteousness takes the form of a rereading of Habakkuk 2.4 and Genesis 15.6 (Rom 1.17; 3.21–4.25). In this sense, Richard Hays is right: 'Israel's Scripture is the “determinative subtext” that plays a constitutive role in shaping [Paul’s] literary production'.³ But again, to sharpen the point, it is precisely this ‘determinative subtext’ that Wisdom and Paul have in common: Israel’s scripture is constitutive of the radically dissimilar theologies of Romans and Wisdom. For this reason, Hays' quite correct observation that Pauline theology is ‘intertextual in character’⁴ is, in comparative terms, to raise rather than answer the hermeneutical question. Because Wisdom and Romans are both instances of intertextual theology and, to borrow a concept from Watson, because both texts are locatable within a ‘single intertextual field’⁵—i.e., because they read the same texts—the crucial comparative question is: why do the author of Wisdom and the Paul of Romans read the same texts differently?

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³ R.B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 16. I would thus want to join Hays in distancing myself from Harnack’s insistence that Paul’s engagement with scripture is only an ad hoc missionary reaction to Judaizing opponents (‘Das Alte Testament in den paulinischen Briefen und in den paulinischen Gemeinden’, *Sitzungsberichte der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-historische Klasse* [1928]: 124–41, quoted in Hays, *Echoes*, 7 n.16). Closer to the mark is J.R. Wagner’s suggestion that Paul’s reading of Israel’s scripture was shaped by his apostolic mission and message and that his apostolic mission and message were informed by his reading of Israel’s scripture (*Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul ‘In Concert’ in the Letter to the Romans* [NovTSup 101; Leiden: Brill, 2002], 3). Watson is therefore correct to argue for a dialogical rather than unilateral relationship between Paul’s gospel and Paul’s interpretative activity (*Hermeneutics*, 16–17), but, as will become evident below, the relationship between Christ and scripture is both reciprocal and asymmetrical: ‘[Paul’s] hermeneutic’, as J.L. Martyn remarks, ‘works from the previously unknown and foolish gospel of the cross to the previously known and previously misunderstood scripture’ and, as Martyn does not say, back again (‘John and Paul on the Subject of Gospel and Scripture’, in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997], 221).

⁴ Hays, *Echoes*, 16.

⁵ Watson, *Hermeneutics*, 5.