CHAPTER TWO

PAUL'S USE OF GOD-LANGUAGE IN CONTROVERSY
IN ROMANS I-4 AND 9-II

When we ask what function statements about God have in their literary context, we must always bear in mind that we are studying a letter. The primary intention of a letter is to be a means of contact and communication between author and recipients. Paul's letters are probably closer to the official letter of his time than to the private. He seeks to inform, to exhort, to convince and to discipline—in short, to perform the same function as he would were he preaching in person.\(^1\) What Paul says about God is related not only to the general purpose of the letter but also to the specific intention of the individual passage where a statement is found. This is true also of general expressions about the "nature" of God, as E. Stauffer points out: "Vor allem aber: nirgends stehen solche Gottesaussagen allein und um ihrer selbst willen da. Sie sind stets verbunden mit Dank oder Bitte, Botschaft oder Forderung: Es geht dem NT nicht um eine Lehre von der Persönlichkeit Gottes, sondern um die geschichtliche Bezeugung und Durchsetzung des Gotteswillens."\(^2\)

Stauffer's comments were made concerning the New Testament in general; with modifications they apply also to the Pauline letters.

In some cases there is a conventional usage of general statements about God, especially in the opening or closing sections of the letter, or in other formulaic parts such as a thanksgiving or a doxology. In the doxology in \textit{II:33-36}, the description of God as the creator is an incentive to praise him; likewise in wish-prayers and blessings, e.g. in \textit{I5:5}, where God is described as "the God of steadfastness and encouragement", this expression is related both to the act that God will perform and to the effect Paul hopes this will have upon his readers.\(^3\) In the opening and closing of the letter the


\(^2\) "\textit{Θεός}" , \textit{TWNT} 3 (1938) 112.

\(^3\) Wiles, \textit{Prayers}, 79-83 and Delling, "Gott des Friedens", 82.
almost stereotyped use of “God our father” and “the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ” has a formulaic, liturgical character. These expressions do not primarily give information about God; based on their common faith in God, their purpose is to establish a link between author and recipients. It is therefore Paul’s use of statements about God in the body of the letter that most clearly reflects his own intentions. It is here that he spells out his concern in each particular letter. In Romans, 1:16-15:33 form the body of the letter; within this main section we shall concentrate upon chapters 1-4 and 9-II. This selection of material is justified partly through our study of word frequency which showed that θεός occurs more frequently in these chapters than in the rest of the letter. Furthermore, this common feature corresponds to a thematic unity between chapters 1-4 and 9-II. The main theme of Romans from 1:16-17 is often understood as a message of salvation by faith. This interpretation stands in need of qualification in the light of what Paul actually says in the subsequent chapters. Why does Paul introduce this salvation as “for Jews first . . .”, and what bearing do his repeated discussions of Israel, in chapters 1-4 and 9-II, have upon this theme? Furthermore, why does he choose Abraham as his example of God’s universal salvation by faith when he returns to his main theme in 3:21-4:25?

It is striking that when Paul speaks of salvation by faith he develops one particular aspect of this theme—its meaning for Israel and its implications for the Jews. To the Jews, Paul’s gospel meant a threat to Israel’s right to salvation. Moreover, it was a serious problem to Christian Jews that most of their fellow-Jews rejected their message. Robin Scroggs describes the situation in this way:

Paul has turned the traditional picture of Jewish piety and its interpretation of its history to the wall. . . . He must answer the questions put by that piety, questions stemming out of the awareness that its very existence has been called into question. In the face of Israel’s rejection of God’s righteousness, both the value of the actual Israel and the trustworthiness of God are at stake.  

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4 This is one of the major functions of the prescript and thanksgiving sections of a letter, see W. Cuellner, “Paul’s Rhetoric of Argumentation in Romans”, *CBQ* 38 (1976) 335-37.
6 “Rhetorician”, 277.