BEFORE YOUR VERY EYES:
ROMAN IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY, GENDER CONSTRUCTS
AND PAUL’S INTER-NATIONALISM*

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Paul has often been interpreted as a Jew who converted to Christianity, tried to convince other Jews of his “new” position, was unsuccessful in this attempt and, as a result, then turned to non-Jews who were more amenable to his outlook. However, the so-called “New Perspective” in Pauline studies has shifted the focus, reassessing Paul in light of first-century intra-Jewish, rather than modern Protestant-Catholic or Christian-Jewish, conflicts. Here Paul is reconfigured as a Jew who expands his Judaism to include non-Jews in a “messianic” religious assemblage. In this schema, Paul is “called,” like the prophets before him, to bring the “good news” of the crucified Messiah to differing communities where he finds himself “among Jews and Gentiles.” This Paul brings the monotheism of Israel (“God is one”)...
to the polytheistic, “pagan” Gentiles, who are then “grafted” onto the Jewish tree under the one God (cf. Rom 9–11). Recent work has built further upon this “New Perspective” and positioned Paul as a critic of the Roman imperial order and “religion” from his Jewish standpoint.4

This inclusion of Gentiles in Paul’s rhetoric is a theme that also benefits from attention to gender and power dynamics. This means endeavoring to understand the concept “Gentiles” in a more nuanced and power-conscious way, taking into account what “Gentiles” signified in Paul’s Roman imperial context. New Testament scholarship still affirms the term ἔθνη (or “nations”) as a solely Jewish designation for non-Jews, “non-Israelite Christians,” “unbelievers” or “those not limited to the people of Israel.”5 This characterization follows a biblical tradition relying on the distinctions between Israel and “the nations” in the First Testament.6 Such designation identifies Paul’s usage as consonant with Jewish tradition, but misses the political and imperial dimensions of this term. Various kinds of ancient writers (e.g., those composing geographical and historical accounts, as well as poetry of the first century C.E.) delineate the concept of ἔθνος (Latin: gens) as a “nation” or “tribe” of people conquered and assimilated into Roman rule. The term is political in these contexts and imposed from the perspective of the Roman conquerors.7 The ἔθνη is a term used to designate the peoples of the Roman Empire; it maps the terrain of Roman imperium. In this broader political analysis, the meaningful hierarchy is not Jew/Gentile, but Roman/nations.


6 See especially James M. Scott, Paul and the Nations: The Old Testament and Jewish Background of Paul’s Mission to the Nations with Special Reference to the Destination of Galatians (WUNT 84; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995). Also see Terence L. Donaldson, Paul and the Gentiles: Remapping the Apostle’s Convictional World (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997).

7 The Romans themselves are also a “nation,” but stand out as the “lords of the world, nation of the toga” (Vergil, Aen. 1.282)—that is, the nation predestined to be associated with civilization and rule over others.