In the opening to his Letter to the Romans, Paul argues that current pagan thinking in Rome and elsewhere in the Graeco-Roman world is a distortion of an aniconic and monotheistic religion originally shared by all. As we shall see, the notion of a monotheistic past resonates particularly with an audience in Rome. By differentiating between the golden age of Roman religion and current practice, Paul presents his own religion as a "logical, i.e. non-ritualistic form of worship" (Rom 12:1–2; cf. 9:4), which restores the ideal. In this way, by invoking the authority of a respectable pagan monotheism in the past, Paul seeks to undermine current polytheistic thinking. At the same time, his approach renders Jewish monotheism less exclusive, as it is not without pagan analogies. This seems to be Paul’s double strategy, as in his letter he aims to reduce tensions between Jews and ex-pagans within the Christian communities at Rome.

These tensions were the result of the fact that for the past five years the pagan converts to what we label “Christianity” in Rome had been without the fellowship of their Christian Jews. The latter, together with the non-Christian Jews from the synagogue, had suffered expulsion by Claudius who, according to Suetonius, had expelled the Jews from Rome because they “constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus” [i.e. of “Christus,” Christ] (Claudius 25.4). As this had happened in A.D. 49, over these five years the ex-pagan Christians had begun to develop a Christian identity separate from the Jewish Christians.

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2 Translations of classical sources are normally taken from the LCL with occasional small alterations. Translations of biblical quotations are, unless otherwise stated, taken from the REB with occasional alterations.
the former exiles (both non-Christian and Christian Jews) started to return to Rome after Claudius’ death (A.D. 54) and Christian Jews again met their ex-pagan co-religionists, tensions arose, which Paul set out to address in his letter.

His answer to these challenges is not simply to bolster the Jewish monotheistic identity of the returning Christian Jews, but to point at the pagans’ own distant monotheistic golden age. Paul tries to build common ground between the Jews and pagans, which lies not in Jewish monotheism, but in monotheism as such. It is not surprising then that Paul sketches the outlines of this monotheism not by reference to the Jewish scriptures but with the aid of general Greek philosophy.

1. Paul

Although Paul broadens the scope of monotheism beyond Judaism, he is very critical of paganism insofar as it deviates from original monotheism. The conduct of pagan polytheists is clearly “indefensible” to him.

For all that can be known of God (τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ θεοῦ) lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed it to them. Ever since the world began his invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible to the eye of reason (τὰ γὰρ ἀόρατα αὐτοῦ . . . νοούμενα καθορᾶται), in the things he has made. Their conduct, therefore, is indefensible; knowing God (γνόντες τὸν θεὸν), they have refused to honour him as God, or to render him thanks. Hence all their thinking has ended in futility (ἐματαιώθησαν ἐν τοῖς διαλογισμοῖς αὐτῶν), and their misguided minds (ἡ ἁσύνετος αὐτῶν καρδία) are plunged into darkness. (Rom 1:19–21)

Although German protestant scholarship has been very reluctant to grant that Paul employs Greek natural theology, this is beyond question for those trained in ancient philosophy. Anglo-American biblical scholars have pointed out this prejudice among German and German-influenced continental scholars. Commenting on Rom 1:19–20, James Dunn, for instance, states unequivocally:

Also clear is the fact that some sort of natural theology is involved here….we still have to speak of a “natural theology”—that is here, of

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3 Cf. the fate of Aquila and Prisca/Priscilla according to Acts 18:2, 18, 26; 1 Cor 16:19; and Rom 16:3.