

Sketches on Romans 1

verse 18

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

introduction

Paul begins the passage with a statement concerning the operation of divine wrath, and the objects of that wrath.³⁷ The largest question facing us is what does Paul mean by orgh theou? As we shall see, understanding what Paul means by wrath will have a bearing on how one interprets the subsequent question of natural theology. The term “wrath” appears several times in Romans. Wrath is mentioned again at 3:5, 9:22, and 12:19, from which we learn that for Paul it cannot be “unjust” (3:5) and that it is associated with making known God’s power (9:22). In all, as Leon Morris observes: “Paul uses orgh in 21 of its 36 New Testament occurrences, of which 12 come in Romans,” and “all 12 appear to refer to the divine wrath.”³⁸ Clearly wrath is an important concept. It will be central for our discussion to discover just what the phrase “wrath of God” means for the passage under consideration, and the implications of this understanding for the question of natural theology in the subsequent verses.

First, what is the relation of verse 18 to the preceding verse? Is the wrath part of the gospel, being “revealed” along with it? Or is it something foreign to the gospel? Does verse 18 continue the thought of 16-17, or does Paul move the argument in a new direction? Stuhlmacher notes that “the connection between v. 18 and v. 17 is very close, being formulated by Paul as a conscious contrast.”³⁹ One possibility is that Paul, by this contrast, is moving his thought into a new direction: away from the revelation of the gospel

³⁷This is directed against the Gentiles, and it is nicely balanced with the conviction of the Jews at 2:1-3:9.

³⁸Leon Morris, The Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p. 75, note 186.

³⁹Stuhlmacher, Romans, p. 35.

and into a different arena. Or is the opposite the case? Is he continuing the same line of thought? Does the opening gar of verse 18 link the revelation of the gospel to the thoughts about wrath which follow? If it links the two in parallelism, then Paul may be arguing that wrath is known only in the same way that the gospel is -- by revelation and appropriated by faith. We can see from the outset that Paul is shaping the mind of reader to understand his argument in certain "categories". Verse 18 sets the tone for the understanding of what is to follow. Thus how we understand the meaning of verse 18 has a direct bearing on how we will understand the question of natural theology in verses 19 and following.

A key consideration here is whether the wrath is known only by special revelation, or whether it can be ascertained by other (human) means and faculties. Is the wrath part of the gospel, being revealed along with it, or is the wrath revealed in a different manner? This is important to consider. If it is part and parcel of the gospel, and revealed in like manner, then Paul is continuing a thought: there are things which are known only by special revelation, and appropriated only through faith. If on the other hand the wrath is not part of the gospel, and is discoverable apart from the special revelation of the gospel, then Paul is hinting that there are things of God which can be known apart from faith, apart from special revelation.

What of the wrath itself? Is it something known by humanity apart from the gospel? If so, then on what grounds is it known? One of the grounds for a possible knowledge of wrath, and then of natural theology in general, is the idea of an ordered universe. Is there an ontological structure in place, a cause and effect process by which any rational person can deduce the fact of the wrath of God? Is there a set of truths about God which we can know by deduction, by applying our powers to the observation of the world? If this is what Paul is teaching then we have an indication that he is leading us to a high view of natural theology, and laying the groundwork for knowing God from creation. An ordered universe points to the wrath as a phenomenon which is discoverable apart from special revelation. Paul would

then be opening the door for a consideration of the means by which we know truths about God apart from His revelation in Christ and the Scriptures.

Or is the wrath not discoverable by us? If this is the case then Paul is strictly limiting what we can know apart from special revelation. If the wrath is not cause and effect, or grounded in an ontological structure, then is it a rather personal reaction on God's part? If this is the case then Paul is leading us away from a high view of natural theology. Should the wrath be part and parcel of the gospel, revealed in the same manner, then there is little hope that we can know things of God apart from special revelation. If the wrath of God is not "discoverable" apart from the gospel, then Paul is setting the tone that little else will be discovered by the Gentiles.

Finally, what is the "truth" which is suppressed? Is this a truth which is revealed, and known only by revelation, or is this a truth which human reason can come to know without special revelation? Or is the content of this truth only understood after the exegesis of the subsequent verses?

That the verse has caused some difficulty is evidenced as early as Marcion, who excised theou, presumably to lessen the anthropomorphic approach.⁴⁰ The question of just what the "wrath of God" is has been troublesome for some time. Marcion's decision to remove "of God" shows part of the problem. Do we consider God's wrath to be something akin to human passions and anger? If so then what kind of God do we have? Is this an anthropomorphic deity? Or is the "wrath of God" a phrase which is intended to convey, in human expression, something which is not a human kind of emotion or reaction?

Marcion offered one solution to the question, and in more modern times the issue is no less contentious. We can see in the literature of this century varying and contradictory approaches to the issue. Two opposing viewpoints, characterized in the exegeses of C.H. Dodd and C.E.B. Cranfield, show the boundaries on either side of the question. Each takes a particular stance on the interpretation of wrath. The boundaries of the matter are whether

⁴⁰See E. Käsemann, Romans, p. 37.

the wrath of God is a personal and willed reaction on God's part, or whether the wrath is of a rather cause and effect nature, in a sort of ontological morally ordered universe. Cranfield characterizes the former, and Dodd the latter. Other commentators, conscious of the problems on either extreme of the question, have attempted to capture the middle ground. The progress of our project depends very much on taking elements from either extreme and weaving them together.

gar - parallelism or contrast?

Verse 18 follows what many believe to be the theme of Paul's letter to the Romans. Verses 16-17 state the positive content of the gospel: it the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. In it the righteousness of God is revealed. Thus the first connection to the verses under consideration. The righteousness of God, the gospel, "is revealed." So also Paul says that the wrath of God "is revealed." Does this mean that both are known in the same way? One can see easily that there is no hope of a "natural knowledge" of the gospel. It is by faith that we appropriate what is known only through God's special and particular revelation of Himself in Christ. How then is Paul setting the tone for what is to follow? Is the wrath of God known in the same way, only by special revelation? Does verse 18 continue the thought of verse 17, or does it stand in contrast?

If the wrath is part of the gospel, and is revealed in a like manner, then Paul is simply continuing his line of thought from verses 16 and 17. Knowledge of these things comes about only by faith, through revelation, and not by the unaided application of human faculties. Thus the tone would be set against natural theology. If however there is a difference between the two "revelations" (righteousness in the gospel, and wrath from heaven) then Paul is setting the stage for an understanding of two kinds of knowledge. One is gained through faith by means of special revelation, the other is gained by the application of human faculties. So another question arises: is the wrath a "discoverable phenomenon"

apart from the gospel? If it is, then this would allow more weight to the argument that there are things of God (wrath at least) which are discoverable apart from the revelation of Christ and the gospel.

Dunn has shown, rightly, that the opening word of verse 18 is a matter of debate:

‘gar’, for , can express simply connection or continuation of thought without specifying what precisely the connection is. That a connection of thought is certainly intended is clear from the parallel structuring of verses 17 and 18. But the orgh theou epi adikian as against the dikaiousnh theou eis pistin strongly suggests that the connection is as much contrast as of cause...”⁴¹

That there is a connection is evident. The question is what kind of connection is it? There are two main positions advanced on either side of the issue: there is a parallelism; there is a contrast. First we will examine the possibility that the gar expresses a parallelism: verse 18 continues the thought of the previous verses. This seems to lead to the position that the wrath is part of the content of the gospel, and is not discovered or understood apart from the special revelation of the gospel. As well, there is the position that while there is a contrast in content (gospel and wrath are different), wrath is still not discovered or understood apart from the gospel revelation. Lastly we shall examine the argument that there is a contrast both of content and the means by which that content is appropriated. Within this last position there is evidence that Paul is leading us on a new line of thought, and that the wrath is discoverable apart from the gospel. We will examine the support for each position, and draw our conclusions.

On one side of the question there is the possibility that the gar expresses parallelism. Since Paul states that both the righteousness and the wrath are revealed, there can be no doubt that he is expressing a continuity of this line of thought. As the gospel is not a phenomenon which is “discoverable” by natural means, so the wrath is known only if God wills it to be known by special revelation. The wrath is thus seen as part of the revelation

⁴¹Dunn, Romans, p. 54.

of the gospel. Three commentators in particular support this view. A sketch of the arguments presented by Cranfield, Morris and Robinson highlight the main reasons for taking the gar as conjunctive.

Cranfield is chief among commentators in his insistence that the wrath is not discoverable apart from the gospel revelation. What Cranfield proposes is that we focus on the fact that the wrath is *being revealed*. Revelation would hardly be necessary if wrath were part of an observable cause and effect process in the universe. Cranfield emphasizes that the wrath is both a personally willed reaction on God's part, and that it is part of the revelation of the gospel. Cranfield sees what is at stake in this issue. For him there can be no true knowledge of God's wrath apart from revelation.

He sees a parallelism, not a contrast, between verses 17 and 18. His reasoning begins with his understanding of gar, which he takes as conjunctive. He argues against Dodd and Moffat, whom he represents as taking the gar as adversative. Cranfield states: "We take it then the point of the gar is that the revelation of the wrath of God against men's sin makes it abundantly clear that there can be no question of men's having a status of righteousness before God in any other way than ek pistews eis pistin."⁴² In this view, Paul is continuing his original line of thought. There can be no 'natural knowledge' of God; knowledge of God can only come about through faith, by means of revelation. Thus the first word of verse 18 sets the stage for subsequent understanding of what Paul means by wrath. Cranfield continues:

In view of the parallelism, the most natural way of taking v. 18 is to understand it to mean that God's wrath also is being revealed *in the gospel*, that is, in the on-going proclamation of the gospel, and to recognize that behind, and basic to, this revelation of the wrath of God in the preaching, is the prior revelation of the wrath of God in the gospel events.⁴³

⁴²C.E.B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (New International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, 1979), p. 108.

⁴³Cranfield, Romans: A Shorter Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 29.

Cranfield argues that “the two revelations referred to in these two verses are then really two aspects of the same process.”⁴⁴ Cranfield thinks that the revelation of wrath is part of the revelation of the gospel, so that we only see the full truth of God’s wrath in the context of that wrath as put on Christ at the Cross. He argues⁴⁵ that Paul would have said that both the righteousness and the wrath are being revealed in the gospel; there is not a contrast between the gospel being revealed ‘on earth’ and the wrath ‘from heaven’: they are both from God.

Morris sees a close connection with v 17, but for Morris it means that “the gospel is necessary *because* there is such a thing as the wrath of God... This is the plight of mankind. Apart from this the gospel has no meaning.”⁴⁶ This is what is signified by the opening gar of verse 18; it relates the gospel to the wrath. Universal sinfulness is the background against which the gospel is revealed. In this way the wrath is not a discoverable phenomena for humanity. It is, in Morris’ views, something God has made known apart from our efforts to discern it. The use of the “is revealed” points to this: “It is part of the revelation in the gospel that God’s attitude towards sin is one of righteous wrath...Both the righteousness and the wrath are a matter of revelation.”⁴⁷

Robinson as well has argued that “the revelation of his righteousness and of his wrath are in fact one and the same revelation.”⁴⁸ The view that the wrath is part of the gospel, being revealed along with it, keeps the epistemology of the passage within the framework of faith and revelation. This is hardly surprising, granted that “revealed” is used of both gospel and wrath. As we shall see, this initial interpretation of the opening of verse 18 sets a tone for what is to follow in the subsequent verses. The thrust of this

⁴⁴Cranfield, ICC, p. 110.

⁴⁵Cranfield, ICC, p. 111.

⁴⁶Morris, Romans, p. 75.

⁴⁷Morris, Romans, p. 77.

⁴⁸J.A.T. Robinson, Wrestling With Romans (London: SCM, 1979), p. 19: “the condition of chaos and degeneration which Paul goes on to depict the following verses is not simply a chaos and degeneration *against* the will of God, but a chaos and degeneration which *embodies* the will of God.”

position is that we know things mainly by revelation, not by our own ability. However, this is not the only possible interpretation, and there are some problems with this position.

The notion that God's wrath needs to be revealed in the same way that the gospel is revealed creates some difficulties. It precludes the possibility that people saw in everyday events the judgment or activity of a divinity who was displeased. Yet this was, as Dunn and Ziesler will argue,⁴⁹ part of the general knowledge which people had: the gods punish transgressors. No special revelation seems to be needed to convince people that divine wrath comes in judgment upon wrong doing.⁵⁰ And Paul himself seems to think that people have at least a general knowledge of God's "just decree" (verse 32). Morris allows that one might "see some of the revelation of the divine wrath...in the suffering, frustration, and sheer disaster that are so often the consequence of sin."⁵¹ But like Cranfield, Morris thinks that the wrath can only be fully understood in the light of the cross.

So for Cranfield the wrath is part and parcel of the revelation of the gospel, so that "its reality is only truly known when it is seen in its revelation in Gethsemene and on Golgotha."⁵² However, if this is the case, then why is Christ not explicitly alluded to as the object of wrath here? God's wrath comes upon those who suppress a specific truth, something which Christ did not do. Paul is building an indictment in these verses against Gentile sinners, so that they are the objects against which the wrath of God is actually directed. While Cranfield, Morris and Robinson see a parallelism between verses 16-17 and verse 18, it is also possible to see the gar as adversative, expressing contrast. To the arguments in favour of this position we now turn our attention.

⁴⁹See below.

⁵⁰So also John Ziesler, Paul's Letter to the Romans (TPI New Testament Commentaries; London: SCM Press, 1989), p. 76. See Ziesler's comments below.

⁵¹Morris, Romans, p. 76.

⁵²Cranfield, Shorter, p. 30.

Käsemann sees the gar as expressing contrast: “Verses 17 and 18 are deliberate antithetical parallels.”⁵³ For Käsemann, wrath is not “the content of the gospel, nor part of the divine righteousness, nor its function. Justifying righteousness and condemning righteousness do not run parallel.”⁵⁴ He sees the wrath as “something which is already present although not yet recognized, ...something which only now comes to light along with the gospel and in the realm of the gospel.”⁵⁵ In contrast to Fitzmyer,⁵⁶ Käsemann sees the wrath in terms of a specific event, rather than in terms of ongoing process. It is an event which happens to man because “prior to the gospel man does not really know what sin is even though he lives in it. Similarly he does not know about the wrath to which he has fallen victim.”⁵⁷ Yet because there is no possibility of conscious awareness⁵⁸ of this wrath, it is necessary for it to be revealed:

It is not merely something of which man now becomes conscious from within but an event which encounters him from without and which is therefore characterized as eschatological revelation.⁵⁹

Ziesler rightly steers a course away from the assessment that the wrath is part of the revelation of the gospel. He cites three points to support his case: that Paul does not clearly say that wrath (in contrast with righteousness) is revealed in the gospel; it is odd

⁵³Käsemann, Romans, p. 35.

⁵⁴Käsemann, Romans, p. 35. He also cites G. Bornkamm, “The Revelation of God’s Wrath (Romans 1-3)” in Early Christian Experience (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 47-70, p. 48 as supporting his views.

⁵⁵Käsemann, Romans, p. 35. Though he admits opposition to his position, see H. Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 109ff.

⁵⁶See below.

⁵⁷Käsemann, Romans, p. 35.

⁵⁸So also we see that Ridderbos argues that the wrath is not recognized by humanity in general: “Romans 1:18 is also characteristic of the Pauline usage, where Paul speaks of the wrath of God. What is meant is not the announcement that God is wrathful, but the coming into operation of that wrath, even though this is not recognized as such.” Herman Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p.47. See also R. Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1951) vol 1, pp. 275 ff.

⁵⁹Käsemann, Romans, p. 35. Dunn will argue against this, below.

that wrath can be good news; and perhaps most important, Paul seems to assume that everyone ought to know what sin is: no special revelation appears to be needed.⁶⁰ This last criticism may also be leveled at Käsemann. Surely we must grant that there is some knowledge of what constitutes sin and wrath for those who live outside the gospel revelation.⁶¹ Ziesler himself does not draw an absolute conclusion, but rather steers a vague course: “We must therefore be cautious in connecting the wrath too exactly to the gospel, though the possibility cannot be ruled out.”⁶²

On the far side of the question, C.H. Dodd stakes his ground immediately: “The adversative conjunction ‘but’ in i.18 shows that the revelation of God’s anger is contrasted, and not identified, with the revelation of His righteousness.”⁶³ Dodd begins his exegesis with an understanding that the righteousness and the wrath are not parallel, that Paul is in fact contrasting the content of verse 18 with the content of verses 16-17. As we continue our examination, we shall see how this beginning point colours the interpretation of the subsequent verses. Dodd is not alone in seeing a contrast here.

Stuhlmacher as well believes that “the connection between verses 17 and 18 is very close, being formulated by Paul as a conscious contrast.”⁶⁴ He offers a specific reason for this contrast. Stuhlmacher argues that the two concepts, God ‘s righteousness and God’s wrath, “are from the standpoint of the Old Testament, antithetical concepts.”⁶⁵ So we must not equate the wrath and the gospel, for though both are “revealed”, the former comes about through the “word of proclamation” while the latter is revealed from heaven, “that is, from

⁶⁰Ziesler, Romans, p. 76. He is aiming his critique at Cranfield in particular.

⁶¹We might also briefly raise the point that Paul seems to include human conscience as a means of knowing morality.

⁶²Ziesler, Romans, p. 76.

⁶³C.H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (London: Hodder And Stoughton, 1932),p. 45.

⁶⁴Stuhlmacher, Romans, p. 35.

⁶⁵Stuhlmacher, Romans, p. 35. This is close to Käsemann’s position - that the two are not parallel, but Stuhlmacher elaborates on what the difference means.

God's judgment seat."⁶⁶ This is a difference which is not fully addressed by Cranfield and those who simply say that both are revealed. There is a difference here. Stuhlmacher himself does not elaborate on this difference, but only points out that the two represent different activities on God's part. For our purposes, it must be noted that he does make the distinction between the sources of these two revelations. The contrast expressed in this verse is not absolute (both gospel and wrath are "revealed") but there is a difference in the means of revelation. gospel is known in one manner (proclamation) and wrath is known in another (God's judgment seat). Here then we see that there can be different ways of knowing things of God. His gospel is known in one manner, and His wrath is known in another, yet God is still ultimately the source of both.

Fitzmyer also is of the opinion that the gar of verse 18 expresses contrast, rather than parallelism.⁶⁷ This contrast leads to a difference between the gospel and the wrath. The gospel is a specific kind of revelation, and for Fitzmyer, more in keeping with Dodd's logic, wrath "is an element in the ongoing divine governance of the world of human beings without the gospel, in which sin is constantly manifesting itself. Opposed to such wrath revealed toward sinful humanity stands the gospel that reveals the uprightness of God."⁶⁸

All of these statements serve to highlight a tension in the discussion. On the one hand we see for example that Fitzmyer wishes to maintain against Cranfield that verse 18 stands in conscious contrast to verse 17.⁶⁹ The gospel is a specific kind of revelation; there is no doubt that humanity by its natural faculties cannot deduce its content from an observation of natural phenomena. That Jesus was a man, living in a certain area at a certain time, that he was so tall and weighed so much, this can be the object of the natural faculties of human reason. To a person looking at Jesus in Galilee, deduction can tell whether or not these things are true; whether he is so tall or not so tall. But can the natural faculties of human

⁶⁶Stuhlmacher, Romans, p. 36.

⁶⁷Fitzmyer, Romans, p. 277. So also Dodd, Romans, p. 18, and Dunn, Romans, p. 54.

⁶⁸Fitzmyer, Romans, 278.

⁶⁹So also Stuhlmacher, Romans.

reason deduce that he was the Son of God? It is not the same kind of knowledge which is being sought. Natural reason can tell us from observation whether Jesus was of such and such a height, but cannot tell us from observation that He is the saviour from sin, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Special revelation is needed for that knowledge to occur. There are certain truths which are not deductively observable.

However, is the same true of God's wrath? Do we need special revelation in order to know it? If the wrath is indeed an "ongoing divine governance of the world of human beings without the gospel," then this revelation must be at least slightly different in nature. Fitzmyer does not elaborate on the implied difference, but the question is raised. What Fitzmyer has raised is the possibility that the wrath is not part of the gospel, and it is revealed apart from the gospel in the continuous ongoing governance of the world. Thus we have the groundwork being laid for speaking of two kinds of revelation. It is possible that the revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is appropriated in one manner, and the wrath is appropriated in another. After all, if the wrath shows the concept of divine governance, that is an idea acceptable to Gentile thought. A Stoic would recognize an inherent order in the world: a divine logos. Upon this one could then begin to build a natural theology from the observation of ordered governance. This would be a quite different starting point than the "revelation of the gospel" which can only be appropriated by faith, as Paul argues in the remainder of the letter to the Romans. This points us in a direction which allows for a "natural theology" based on humanity's observation of the "revelation" of divine governance, as opposed to a theology based on the revelation of the gospel.

We have seen that there is support for either side of the question. Ziesler's assessment of Cranfield's arguments seems most succinct and to the point. Surely there must be a difference between the gospel and the wrath, between the righteousness which is revealed in the gospel and the wrath which is revealed from heaven. Commentators agree that there is some connection between the verses 16-17 and verse 18. Yet the connection is

one of contrast rather than parallelism. Paul is beginning a new thought. He is beginning his indictment of humanity and the Gentiles in particular. This is an indictment of those who did not have special revelation. Hence, Paul is beginning by opening up to us the possibility that there are some things (wrath at least) which can be known apart from the gospel. This is simply to say that the existence of the wrath, if not its full extent, can be known apart from special revelation of the gospel. So Paul begins with a contrast between what is revealed in the gospel, and what is revealed from heaven, indicating at least that there are two kinds of “revelations.” This is the first stone in the foundation of his argument in verses 18-23.

the wrath itself - personal and willed or an “ordered moral universe”?

The next step is a closer look at just what the content of the wrath is. We have seen that there must be a difference between the revelation of the gospel and the revelation of the wrath.

Several commentators have allowed the possibility that there can be more than one kind of revelation, that the wrath (at least in part) can be discovered apart from special revelation. We now turn our attention to the wrath itself. The question at hand is whether the wrath is personal or impersonal. Do we live in an ordered universe, where human faculties can discern objective patterns, make inferences, and draw conclusions? Is the content of the wrath something which falls under this kind of process? In exploring further the wrath itself, we run across the question of whether the wrath operates in accord with a structured, ordered world. At one extreme the wrath can simply be considered part of the ontological structure of things. In that case, Paul is laying more groundwork for a natural theology of the old school Enlightenment variety: human reason can be applied to the world and deduce true conclusions. An alternative view is that the wrath is not part of a cause and effect mechanism in an ordered universe; it is rather God’s own personal reaction to sin.

In this case, Paul is laying it down that wrath is known only as God chooses to make it known, it will not be discovered by human faculties observing the world.

If the wrath is impersonal, then it may simply be part of a cause and effect process evident in the universe. Is this then an example of using human ability to deduce a truth from a structured, ordered universe, independent of special revelation? The wrath may simply be “there” so to speak, for humanity to discover by its own abilities and observations. We can see from the outset that this will have a bearing on how one interprets the capacity of humanity to deduce the existence or attributes of the Creator or God from creation. The second possibility is that the wrath is a personal reaction on God’s part to human sin. If this is the case then there is little hope that Paul is laying the groundwork for discovering truths about God which are the foundation of a natural theology. We will examine several possibilities. First there is the “ordered universe” view: the wrath is part of the structure of things. Then there are arguments in favour of seeing wrath as God’s personal reaction. Finally we will explore the possibility of a middle ground, using points raised on both sides of the initial “either/or” approach, and draw our conclusions.

One view that would support a natural theology is what we may term the “ordered universe” view. Support for this view is most typified by the arguments of Dodd, Hanson, and MacGregor. The background to this view can be drawn from the Gentile circles which Paul considered his mission field. For a Stoic there could be no question that we live in an ordered universe. Thus from the perspective of a Gentile under indictment, the wrath of God makes sense in that divine wrath is an observable phenomenon built into the structure of things. Yet it is not only to the Gentile mind that such an idea would appeal. Barr has argued:

to modern Old Testament scholarship there can be no question that the idea of a world order is extremely central. It is evident especially in the Wisdom literature and in its relations with ancient Near Eastern culture; and through these it spills over into many other aspects of Old Testament thought, especially the idea of creation, which on the one hand takes the form of

separation and ordering, and on the other hand, as has been emphasized, develops into the central base for natural theology.⁷⁰

C.H. Dodd said the wrath was “not a certain feeling or attitude of God toward us, but some process or effect in the realm of objective facts.”⁷¹ His view is that wrath expresses a necessary logical connection, immanent in the created order. Rather than seeing wrath as a personal reaction on God’s part, Dodd argues that Paul uses the phrase “in a curiously impersonal way.”⁷² For Dodd, Paul uses the phrase wrath of God “to describe an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.”⁷³ God’s wrath, in this view, is built into the very fabric of the universe, inasmuch as sin necessarily evokes a predictable response. This response is not ‘new’ every time sin occurs; it operates almost like a law of physics. If person X commits sin Y, then of logical necessity wrath Z occurs. The “moral universe view” sees this as God’s involvement in punishing human sin. Only in a universe governed by moral laws and necessities is this view possible. God’s punishment is built into the system, so to speak.

Supporters of this view include A.T. Hanson, who called the wrath “wholly impersonal” and saw it as “the inevitable process of sin working itself out in history.”⁷⁴ MacGregor as well falls into this camp.⁷⁵ From the outset we can see that if one holds this view of logical necessity in an ordered universe, it would subsequently be more easy to support a high view of natural theology. If the universe has a certain ontological structure, then the processes of reason and deduction can be applied to it with much less hesitancy. This would mean that one could have some degree of certainty in the process of reflecting on

⁷⁰Barr, Biblical Faith and Natural Theology, p. 173.

⁷¹Dodd, Romans, p. 49.

⁷²Dodd, Romans, p. 48.

⁷³Dodd, Romans, p. 50.

⁷⁴A.T. Hanson, The Wrath of the Lamb (London: SPCK, 1959), pp. 37, 69 . See also pp. 81ff.

⁷⁵G.H.C. McGregor, “The Concept of the Wrath of God in the New Testament” New Testament Studies 7 (1960-61): pp. 101-109.

creation in order to discern the Creator, or at least the Creator's attributes. Much in the same way that deductive reasoning is used in the natural sciences, so if there is a moral structure to the universe then one can apply human intellect to the creation and be fairly certain of the truth of the deductions.

However, this line of argument involves several other factors, which shall also arise later. It implies that human reason is capable of making valid deductions from creation leading to knowledge of God, in a way that implies that reason is independent of moral standing. In other words, does the concept of sin tell us anything about the present capacity of human reason? It is assumed that human reason still operates in a proficient manner on these questions. This view also implies that God is a notional object in the same way that the force of gravity is. That is to say, does the existence of a structured moral universe lend itself to using the model of a structured physical universe? One can deduce certain physical truths from an examination of creation (gravity's force in relation to the speed of an object falling), but can one deduce with as much certainty truths which are not "physical", such as the existence or attributes of God? Nonetheless, proponents of the "ordered moral universe" viewpoint will argue that the wrath of God is akin to physical law, and so open the way for reason to make positive deductions in the ontological realm.

The interpretation of the wrath of God, then, is a first step in exploring the question of natural theology in Paul. Building on his own interpretation, Dodd goes on:

The impiety and wickedness of men is hindering the truth about the nature of God, which is native to the human mind, from having its due effect in the life of human society at large. There is no other passage where Paul so explicitly recognizes 'natural religion' as a fundamental trait of human nature.⁷⁶

Implicit in Dodd's logic is that a structured moral universe, a cause and effect process, enables one to posit a cause and effect argument in ontology. The truth about the

⁷⁶Dodd, Romans, p. 51.

nature of God is “native to the human mind.” In this case a certain interpretation of the meaning of the wrath of God goes hand in hand with a high view of natural theology.

What Dodd and his followers have highlighted is the concept that human reason can deduce truths if the universe is an ordered system. Thus if God’s wrath is seen as His participation in the structure of things, He has built into the system a means of inferring truths about Himself. Paul begins his argument for a natural theology by appealing to this idea. Yet Dodd’s arguments do not fully appreciate *how* God participates in this ordered universe. We do not want to leave God simply as the “watchmaker” who leaves his creation running while he steps out of the shop.

It is with this criticism in mind that we find support for the idea that the wrath is a personal and willed reaction on God’s part. Emphasis on the wrath as God’s reaction rescues us from the idea that God is an impartial observer in the affairs of humanity. Consciously opposing Dodd is C.E.B. Cranfield:

C.H. Dodd argued that Paul did not mean to indicate a personal reaction on God’s part...on the ground that it would be objectionable to attribute to God ‘the irrational passion of anger’...Dodd’s attempt to depersonalize the reality which the Bible denotes by God’s wrath should surely be rejected.⁷⁷

What Cranfield proposes is that we focus on the fact that the wrath is *being revealed*, and that this is a personal act on God’s part. Revelation would hardly be necessary if wrath were part of an observable cause and effect process in the universe. Cranfield wants to emphasize that the wrath is a personally willed reaction on God’s part. Thus God’s personal and direct involvement in human affairs is rescued. Cranfield is correct in this assertion - our God is also a personal God. Cranfield, though, follows the style of Barth too much here. Cranfield’s answer to Dodd’s proposal is simply a “NO” to the entire idea. If Dodd characterizes one extreme, Cranfield characterizes the opposite. For Cranfield, wrath is

⁷⁷Cranfield, Shorter, p. 29.

part of the gospel revelation, part of a unique revelation personally willed by God. In his view there is nothing discoverable by humanity in an ordered universe.

Morris begins his exposition of Romans with a comment that shows what his ultimate conclusions will be, and this colours his interpretation of these verse: “Not until we come to see that our search for God is and must be completely unsuccessful will we discover that God is searching for us.”⁷⁸ From the outset he proclaims the Gentiles’ search for God to be necessarily and absolutely unsuccessful. It is in this spirit that he seems to caricature the Gentile world: “As a rule they saw no problem in sin. The religions of the day seem to have had easy-going standards, so that people were not troubled by the lives they lived.”⁷⁹ Morris takes up Cranfield’s position and expands it. The character of this wrath is not one which allows much room for anything else than God’s personal and vehement action against sin.

Paul is clear that God is not passive in the face of sin. God is implacably and vigorously opposed to every evil. Ultimately everyone must reckon with this reality. Paul’s reference to revelation, his genitive *of God*, and his *from heaven* are ways of emphasizing that the wrath is a divine activity. God is doing something in opposition to sin, not leaving sinners to their own devices.⁸⁰

Morris goes to some length to reject Dodd’s views⁸¹ because he sees in them a dangerous perversion of the gospel. As he says, “They fit the mood of our time. People today tend to see the truth that ‘God is love’ as the one significant thing. They quite overlook the unyielding moral demand that runs through Scripture.”⁸² Of course this is not what an alternative interpretation necessarily rests upon, though that may be the reason for some

⁷⁸Morris, *Romans*, p. 73.

⁷⁹Morris, *Romans*, p. 74. However, this caricature seems to neglect the great amount of moral teaching in the ancient world, and on a popular level, is subject to Ziesler’s criticism that people in general knew what sin was.

⁸⁰Morris, *Romans*, p. 75.

⁸¹And cf Bowen, p. 221.

⁸²Morris, *Romans*, p. 76.

interpreters to assess the wrath as “impersonal”. But Morris is concerned that this will be the outcome. “What we should not do is to abandon the idea that the wrath is personal. This leads to the position that God does not care about sin, or at least does not care enough to act.”⁸³ This last conclusion is rather weak. While Morris’ concerns must be appreciated, it does not necessarily follow that God does not care about sin if His wrath is construed as an operation present in an ordered world. Why? As we have seen from Barr, the idea of an ordered universe is part of the Scriptural understanding of how God created. God as the creator of an ordered world implies that it is God who has willed that the moral universe function in just this manner. God may care enough about sin to structure the universe so that sin is recognized and also punished.

So far we have seen two alternatives: the wrath is wholly impersonal or the wrath is wholly personal. The problem with the “ordered universe” view is that taken to its extreme it reduces God’s interest and activity in the world. It harkens back to Enlightenment ideas of God as the aloof watchmaker. On the other hand, as Barr has pointed out, the idea of an ordered universe is also central to the Biblical tradition in the Old Testament. As such, the concept provides common ground for Jew and Gentile to think about the possibility of what the grounds of a natural theology might be.

Dodd and Cranfield highlight the most basic and obvious tension in interpreting this passage. Is the “wrath of God” a personal and willed reaction on God’s part, or is it an expression of some kind of built-in cause and effect in an ordered universe? Various commentators fall on one side or other, to a greater or lesser degree. Some, conscious of the oppositional “either/or” approach, hint at playing both sides of the question. So for instance, Murray comments that “it is unnecessary, and it weakens the biblical concept of the wrath of God, to deprive it of its emotional and affective character.”⁸⁴ This would seem to be directed against Dodd’s views, though Murray is careful not to let his interpretation go

⁸³Morris, *Romans*, p. 76.

⁸⁴Murray, *Romans*, p. 35.

to the other extreme. Wrath is not to be seen as a “fitful passion.”⁸⁵ In this he is careful to avoid either extreme of interpretation. It is difficult to see exactly where the middle ground is, without falling into a vagueness which simply states what the wrath is not, instead of stating positively what it is.

Käsemann has characterized this section as a “dialogue with the Jews”⁸⁶ and claims that Paul’s notion of wrath derives from OT Jewish apocalyptic. In this way he attempts to give a positive content to what exactly the wrath is. The concept of eschatological revelation comes from Käsemann’s view that

The concept of the wrath of God, which is common in Paul, does not derive from Greek tradition but from OT-Jewish apocalyptic. Hence it is not to be viewed as an emotion nor set within the framework of a moral world view.⁸⁷

Thus he attempts to plot a middle course by avoiding both the emotive and the ordered world. In approaching wrath this way, Käsemann seeks to avoid treating it as “a purely immanent causal connection between guilt and retribution.”⁸⁸ He lays more emphasis on the apocalyptic view, and explains this as the view that “history has always stood under the sign of the last judgment and destruction.”⁸⁹ That the wrath is revealed ap ouranou is not a reference “to God’s inaccessible dwelling (Leenhardt), nor to the heavenly nature of the wrath (Michel), but to the unmediated (Barrett) and unavoidable fate which afflicts humanity.”⁹⁰

⁸⁵Murray, Romans, p. 35.

⁸⁶Käsemann, Romans, p. 34. See the criticism of this view by Dunn, Fitzmyer and others. While there is surely a Jewish hearer to the argument, Paul is not simply addressing them: he is seeking to indict the Gentiles on their own ground.

⁸⁷Käsemann, Romans, p. 37.

⁸⁸Käsemann, Romans, p. 37. “Sometimes the connection between guilt and destiny [as punishment] as the reality of God’s wrath is correctly perceived but wrongly explained in terms of immanent causality (Dodd and his pupils). For Paul everything depends on the fact that in this apparent immanent causality God himself is secretly at work to exact retribution.” He attributes this view to Dodd, Hanson, Macgregor.

⁸⁹Käsemann, Romans, p. 38.

⁹⁰Käsemann, Romans, p. 38.

What Käsemann's does is try to capture middle ground by avoiding a synthesis of the extremes. Ziesler's views seem to be concise and comprehensive. He more succinctly analyzes what Dodd was attempting, pointing out that Dodd was simply avoiding "ascribing to God the irrational passion of anger in anthropomorphic fashion". In a divinely created moral order, God's wrath "is God's wise provision in order to dissuade us from evil."⁹¹ Ziesler points to the example of a man putting his hand in a flame: "If I put my hand in the flames I suffer acute pain, not because God is angry with me, but because that is the way the world is. Further, the world is that way in order to dissuade me from putting my hand in the fire and so be harmed."⁹² This interpretation would lend itself to a more Stoic idea of cause and effect in a universe governed by laws.

That a Gentile would understand wrath in such a fashion does not exhaust the phrase, for Paul's Jewish-Christian hearers would associate it as well with Old Testament imagery and references to the finality of the Day of Judgment.⁹³ This is Ziesler's criticism of Dodd: that he "allowed too little weight to the connection, both in Jewish tradition and in Paul, between the wrath and the Day of Judgment."⁹⁴ Here then Ziesler takes up Käsemann's point, that eschatology does play a part in understanding wrath. "As God is indubitably the Judge, it is unlikely that Paul saw the wrath, even in its present operation as in this passage, entirely in impersonal terms."⁹⁵

Dunn rightly points out more shortcomings of Käsemann's argument, stating that "in Jewish thought divine wrath is not a particularly eschatological concept."⁹⁶ Dunn points

⁹¹Ziesler, Romans, p. 75.

⁹²Ziesler, Romans, p. 75.

⁹³Ziesler, Romans, p. 75. See e.g. Isa. 2:10-22; Dan. 8:19, and elsewhere in Paul 1 Thess. 1:10. Elsewhere in this letter at 2:5 and 5:9.

⁹⁴Ziesler, Romans, p. 75.

⁹⁵Ziesler, Romans, p. 75.

⁹⁶Dunn, Romans, p. 54.

out that in the OT, “the wrath of God had special connection to the covenant relation.”⁹⁷ What we have instead of a purely Jewish category is a universal category; the wrath is applicable to the Jew first, but also to the Greek. Dunn correctly sees that “Paul is shifting from a narrower covenant perspective to a more cosmic or universal perspective, from God understood primarily as the God of Israel to God as Creator of all.”⁹⁸ Dunn’s comments rightly agree with Fitzmyer’s assessment of the “cosmic dimension” of this wrath: Paul is introducing universal and inclusive categories. Part of the universal appeal of Paul’s argument is highlighted by Dunn, who points us to the possible Gentile understanding of the divine wrath. Dunn refers us to the fact that:

orgh theou was a familiar concept in the ancient world--divine indignation as heaven’s response to human impiety or transgression of divinely approved laws, or as a way of explaining communal catastrophes or unlooked for sickness or death (cf. *TDNT* 5:383-409).⁹⁹

Clearly then we must agree that even those with no familiarity with Jewish or Old Testament thought would have in mind a concept of the wrath of God. The Gentiles in the congregation and in the mission field would have had some understanding of this from the culture of classicism. Dunn argues explicitly against the views of Dodd, Macgregor and Hanson: “...clearly, in Paul’s view, ‘wrath’ is not something for which God is merely responsible, ‘an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe’...nor merely an attitude of God, but something God *does*.”¹⁰⁰ Dunn wants to stress the willed activity of God operating in this wrath, rather than simply seeing wrath as the outcome of the structure of the moral universe. Yet there is a structure in place, which Dunn argues is located in

⁹⁷Dunn, Romans, p. 54. Cf. Sanday, W. and A.C. Headlam, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (International Critical Commentary 5th Ed.; New York: Scribner, 1902).

⁹⁸Dunn, Romans, p. 54.

⁹⁹Dunn, Romans, p. 54. In particular one might look at the common concept of the ‘arrows of Apollo’ in the Oedipus cycle: the god brings a plague as punishment for the sin of the city. It was a well established thought in Gentile circles that the god(s) will punish transgressors.

¹⁰⁰Dunn, Romans, p. 55.

humanity: “God’s wrath, we might say, is his handing over of his human creation to themselves...” and from the indictment which explains 1:18, “...it is clear that for Paul ‘the wrath of God’ denotes the inescapable, divinely ordered moral constitution of human society.”¹⁰¹

Returning to the question of the nature of the wrath of God, Dunn seems to try a compromise course by saying with some vagueness:

that a degree of irrationality or incalculability was often manifest in the operation of divine wrath was also evident to classical thought (as expressed particularly in the concept of “fate”)...Jewish thought is familiar with the same feature...¹⁰²

There may be some problems with this view, especially a misunderstanding of the particularly Roman concept of *Fatum*, (which is wholly rational) in contrast to *fortuna*, (which is the realm of the irrational).¹⁰³ A Jewish-Christian reader may have seen a level of ‘irrationality’, but a Gentile Roman even remotely familiar with the opposition between Fate and fortune, especially as seen through a Roman Stoic interpretation of an inherent logos, would have had more ease in assuming a logical necessity of cause and effect. Though a Gentile Christian would assume the break with classicism over the issue of willed creation by God, it does not necessarily follow that there need be any ‘degree of irrationality’ in the wrath of God as understood by the Gentiles. Cranfield has gone too far in reaction to Dodd, and Dunn seems to offer a non committal compromise on issue. What Dunn has positively contributed, though, is that it is quite possible for a Gentile (particularly Stoic) to make sense of Paul’s comments about the wrath of God.

¹⁰¹Dunn, The Theology of Paul the Apostle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 42.

¹⁰²Dunn, Romans, p. 55. He cites only the OCD on the ancient concept of ‘fate’ to support his view of classical conceptions.

¹⁰³The common Roman notion may be most clearly seen in Virgil’s Aeneid, and expanded in the general comments of C.N. Cochrane, Christianity and Classical Culture (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1940).

Fitzmyer holds that the idea of wrath governs the whole section: "...the topic in verses 18-32 is God's wrath as a reaction to human wickedness and unrighteousness."¹⁰⁴ He stresses this wrath as response, but with a twist: "This is to be understood as God's reaction of displeasure at human sinfulness...Wrath is thus an attribute or quality of God, parallel to his uprightness or righteousness in verse 17."¹⁰⁵ Fitzmyer argues that wrath is a *reaction* on God's part, but presumably because God's actions are not separated from God's person, the wrath is also described as an *attribute* or quality of God Himself. This is significant for understanding the subsequent verses, which speak more directly of God's attributes. These shall be addressed in the discussion of verses 19-20.

In language which appears to refute Dodd directly, Fitzmyer goes on to say that in the handing over of the Gentiles to their various forms of moral degradation (1:24, 26, 28) Paul "expresses vividly and concretely the consequences of pagan sin instead of stating the matter abstractly as cause and effect."¹⁰⁶ What Fitzmyer seems to be arguing is that the necessity of the wrath is grounded in God's character, rather than in the structure of the universe, moral or material. However, Fitzmyer quotes with approval the words of J.A.T. Robinson, that:

'Wrath' is the process of inevitable retribution which comes into operation when God's laws are broken... The retribution... resulting in automatic moral degradation, is what 'comes on' almost like a thermostat when, as it were, the moral temperature drops below a certain point.¹⁰⁷

There seems to be an unresolved tension in these statements. How can the wrath be a willed reaction, and yet be part of a rather mechanistic process as Robinson's imagery suggests? Fitzmyer's argument appears to locate the "necessity" of the wrath in the character of God, rather than in the structure of creation. This is an important distinction.

¹⁰⁴Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 270.

¹⁰⁵Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 271.

¹⁰⁶Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 272.

¹⁰⁷Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 272, quoting J.A.T. Robinson *Wrestling With Romans*, p. 18.

On the one hand the wrath seems to have the characteristic of an objectively observable and discernible phenomena, yet Fitzmyer as well notes that this wrath is “revealed”. In a move that contradicts Cranfield,¹⁰⁸ Fitzmyer argues that Paul “does not say that God’s wrath is revealed in the gospel. Instead he expresses the cosmic dimension of the divine wrath, which makes it manifest to all who perceive God’s own reaction to sins of humanity.”¹⁰⁹ Fitzmyer then states that the wrath is not revealed in the gospel, rather, the wrath comes out of God’s own character. The wrath is necessary, but not because it is part of natural moral law in the creation. Rather, it appears to be part of a natural moral law in creation because its necessity is grounded in God. One thing may be noted directly. Fitzmyer rightly draws attention to the “cosmic dimension” of the wrath: it is an inclusivity by which all humanity can be encompassed.

universal appeal

Where does this bring us? First we see that there are advantages to seeing God’s wrath as a personal reaction. It preserves God’s dignity and rights; it upholds the view that God is concerned about sin, and concerned enough to act. However, it does not rule out that there is some kind of order in the universe, in which a Gentile could see that there is a divine punishment for sin. The ordered universe is not simply a cause and effect which is outside God’s will. It is there because God has willed it to be there. Wrath, understood as an attribute of God operating in the universe, preserves both God’s sovereignty to react against sin, and allows for a Gentile to observe the processes at work in “divine governance”, as Fitzmyer has said.

¹⁰⁸Cranfield, Shorter, p. 111.

¹⁰⁹Fitzmyer, Romans, 277.

In short, our assessment of this verse is one which allows Paul to appeal to the Jew first and also to the Greek. As Dunn rightly says, “Both Jew and Greek would be familiar with the idea of divine indignation, of judicial anger against evil. Paul assumes this kind of preunderstanding before he goes on to develop his own exposition.”¹¹⁰ Dunn thus supports our view that Paul is intending his message for as wide an audience as possible, seeking points of contact and inclusivity, and Dunn echoes these same sentiments regarding the last phrase of the verse: “Here again the description is as broad and as inescapable as possible.”¹¹¹ The wrath is directed against *all* impiety and wickedness, and the “truth” is at this point left undefined in terms of its positive content.

What Dunn has very positively contributed to the discussion is the notion that Paul is moving into universal categories, allowing Jews and Gentiles to enter into the argument of Romans. Fitzmyer had argued that wrath was to be understood in terms of “cosmic dimension...which makes it manifest to all...”¹¹² With this appeal to universal categories, however, comes another possible problem. Might not Jews and Gentiles¹¹³ interpret these categories differently? Granted that Paul is writing to Christians at Rome, there may be different contexts in the congregation within which these categories would be differently understood. This would mean that it is possible for Paul to have one message interpreted differently by different groups: A hearer with a Jewish background might understand wrath from one perspective, and a hearer with a Gentile background, particularly if familiar at all with Gentile philosophical schools of thought, might understand wrath in another manner. The former position would lend itself more to seeing wrath as a personal reaction, and the latter to seeing wrath as part of the structure of the universe. We shall see further how

¹¹⁰Dunn, *Romans*, p. 70.

¹¹¹Dunn, *Romans*, p. 70.

¹¹²Fitzmyer, *Romans*, p. 277.

¹¹³James Dunn, *Theology*, p. 93: “the point is that Paul already had in mind a twofold indictment. One draws on characteristic Jewish condemnation of Gentile religion and sexual practice. The other, less overt, contains the reminder that Israel itself falls under the same indictment. It is this which makes the indictment truly universal.”

Hellenistic philosophy, both Jewish and Gentile, attempts to overcome this, particularly in the concepts of the logos and wisdom.

what is the truth?

The last question facing in verse 18 is the meaning of “truth”. A brief survey of commentators will suffice at this point. As there is not a linear exegesis of the passage, it is difficult to say at this point what exactly the truth is which is being suppressed; we shall have to see the content of the subsequent verses in order to discover this.¹¹⁴

Käsemann also tells us what he thinks the “truth” mentioned in this verse is: it is the fact that “the whole world even in its secularity belongs to the Creator.”¹¹⁵ It is neither correct religious or moral knowledge which constitute this truth, but, borrowing an idea from Bultmann: “The reality of the world and the basic sin of mankind consist in not recognizing God in his reality that opens itself to us.”¹¹⁶

The objects of God’s wrath are the impiety and unrighteousness of those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. For Dunn, this means primarily the “man who rebels against his relation of creaturely dependence on God.”¹¹⁷ In this he agrees with Käsemann that the primary sin is “failure to recognize and accept what is man’s proper

¹¹⁴This initial verse is not separable from the interpretation of what follows; indeed it seems that one’s interpretation of 19-20 ff. leads to a particular understanding of the ‘downward spiral’ of 23 ff. which then informs one’s understanding of the full meaning of verse 18. Thus there is not a linear exegesis: the later verses must be understood before the full weight of v. 18 is understood, and this weight will depend very much on which view of the so called ‘natural theology’ one takes. As Käsemann observes verse 19 “establishes” verse 18. See his Romans, p. 35.

¹¹⁵Käsemann, Romans, p. 38.

¹¹⁶Käsemann, Romans, p. 38. He refers us further to TDNT I, 243.

¹¹⁷Dunn, Romans, p. 55.

relation to God.”¹¹⁸ This is the content of the truth which is suppressed, and Dunn summarizes as follows: “The indictment here is that failure to acknowledge God as Creator results inevitably in a sequence of false relations toward God, toward man, and toward creation itself.”¹¹⁹

Ziesler devotes only a few lines to the rest of the verse. Those who suppress the truth are not explicitly Gentiles, but “in view of what follows it is likely that he is speaking of them in particular.”¹²⁰ The truth which is suppressed is “the truth about God as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer.”¹²¹ Concluding his comments on this verse, Morris argues that the truth here “is the general truth that is open to all people, not the truth God has revealed in Christ and the gospel...Paul evidently thinks of truth as dynamic, for it can be hindered.”¹²² As he says, “translations like ‘suppress’ or ‘hinder’ also presuppose that the suppresser or hinderer knows what he is suppressing or hindering.”¹²³ But just what the content of that truth is Morris does not say.

Thus we shall have to see the fuller extent of natural theology and Paul’s indictment of the Gentiles in order to discover just what the truth is that they are suppressing. We shall address this in the next chapters.

further thoughts

What we see in verse 18 is that Paul is truly addressing his letter to the Jew and also to the Greek. There is a universal appeal. This takes place in verse 18 in two ways.

¹¹⁸Dunn, Romans, p. 56.

¹¹⁹Dunn, Romans, p. 56.

¹²⁰Ziesler, Romans, p. 76.

¹²¹Ziesler, Romans, p. 76. He acknowledges his agreement with C.K. Barrett, The Epistle to the Romans (London: A. & C. Black, 1957) p. 34, and also the influence of II (4) Esd. 7:21-24.

¹²²Morris, Romans, p. 78.

¹²³Morris, Romans, p. 78.

First, we have seen that Paul posits a contrast between the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel and the wrath of God which is revealed from heaven. The gospel is a specific kind of special revelation, appropriated only by faith. The wrath of God, on the other hand, while it is “revealed”, is not revealed in the same way that the gospel is. The concept of divine wrath is not unique to Jewish heritage. It is also understandable by the Greek - the Gentiles under indictment in these verses. With this in mind we find that Paul, in verse 18, is beginning to make a distinction between kinds of revelation: special and general. Gospel is special revelation, while at least some knowledge of the existence and character of divine wrath is widely known in Gentile circles.

That the wrath is a divine response to a human condition is not in question. The question is what kind of response is it? It is not as simply understood as with Dodd, who sees it as “an inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.”¹²⁴ At heart is the question: what does the concept of ‘God’s wrath’ involve? Is it a personal and willed reaction of anger on God’s part against the sins of the Gentiles? Or is it somehow a necessary outcome of their sins, woven into the fabric of the created order, that the sins portrayed in verses 19-23 will of necessity produce the results in verses 24 ff.? Or can it be seen as a combination of both? If one simply takes the route that the wrath is a logical necessity, then it appears to lend more weight to a Platonic¹²⁵ and Stoic¹²⁶ interpretation

¹²⁴Dunn, Romans, p. 55.

¹²⁵A Platonist would recognize the classic ‘Platonic ascent’ from the created order to the intelligible realm, and a Stoic would recognize the inherent necessity of the logic of the *Logos* in creation. Though the two terms are distinct, in the period in which the letter was written the two were also closely connected. See e.g. John Dillon, The Middle Platonists (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977). Even in Hellenistic Judaism the two were intermingled. The writings of Philo, for example, contain such combinations of Middle Platonism and Stoicism (i.e. Chrysippus). See e.g. Ronald Williamson, Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹²⁶The possibility of Stoic interpretation and background is evident in Paul, particularly from Galatians. In the context of our pericope and the verse under discussion, we might remember Epictetus’ Enchiridion 17: “Remember that you are an actor in a play, which is as the playwright wants it to be.” Handbook of Epictetus, trans. N. White, (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983). Such common Roman Stoic conceptions, coupled with the deterministic tendency of Stoic physics, would tend to see wrath as a logical consequence of the order of the cosmos.

of verses 19-20. God's wrath is seen as a logical necessity. Yet this need not lead to the position that God is removed from the affairs of humanity. It may be His interested provision for humanity's good.

The understanding of verse 18 hinges on one central idea which at least is clear: that God's wrath comes upon sin. That it comes "from heaven" does not necessarily discount natural knowledge, in that this may be understood as a distinct kind of communication of God's displeasure from above the created order, or, in terms of Gentile philosophy, as the divine element¹²⁷ which is inherent in the lower order and purposely makes itself part of the structure of the world. Seneca says "god approaches men - no, the relation is closer: he enters men...In the bodies of men divine seeds have been scattered."¹²⁸ The divine is evident in the order of creation.

The mind of the reader is being introduced to general concepts and categories which then will be used further in the following verses. The first concept, introduced in verse 18, is that there are some things of God (wrath at least) which are knowable outside special revelation. This is shown by the contrast between special revelation (gospel) and general revelation (wrath). Paul also introduces the reason why the wrath is knowable. We can discover the wrath of God operating in the world because God has willed that His wrath should operate in an ordered universe. This allows the pagans to see the connection between wrong doing and divine punishment. This is not merely a "physical cause and effect" process. Because (as we shall see from the following verses) Paul holds that God is the Creator, it is His own will that has made the world so.

Paul has shown us the first part of his argument. The righteousness of God as revealed in the gospel is a special revelation, which is appropriated by faith. The wrath of God is revealed to all, in that the Gentiles can discern at least the existence of divine wrath

Such a framework of viewing the cosmos would lend itself in a gentile mind to perhaps hear the argument of vv. 19-20 in stronger terms than would a Jewish hearer.

¹²⁷And in Hellenistic Judaism as an aspect of the divine Logos of wisdom philosophy.

¹²⁸Seneca, Epistle 73, 16, in A.A. Long, Hellenistic Philosophy: Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics, 2nd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 233.

in the world. The basis for this is the fact that God has willed His creation to be orderly. The same God who created is the one who has also by default willed that the Gentiles have at least some capacity to perceive the connection between sin and divine wrath. In so far as wrath is willed by God, it is not extrinsic to Him, but is rather like an attribute. In perceiving wrath, the Gentiles under indictment are perceiving something of God's own self.

Thus Paul has laid the groundwork for a further understanding of natural theology in verses 19 - 20.