"All flesh or no flesh at all? A fresh look at Gal 2:16"

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Introduction

One of the great contributions of the new perspective on Paul has been calling us to a more nuanced view of Paul's attitude to his Jewish tradition and the status of the law.

Notwithstanding these steps forward there still remains much work to be done in exploring those texts that appear to make negative assessment of the tradition that shaped Paul.

Translations

The particular phrase that is the focus of this paper is found in Gal 2:16 and is generally translated “because no one will be justified by works of the law” (so NRSV) a phrase indebted to Psa 143:2 that Paul also cites in Rom 3:20, and notable for the Pauline addition of “works of the law.”¹ A cursory view of a number of translations in English and German, and those provided by a number of contemporary commentators reveals that very few exeges translate the phrase πᾶσα σάρξ as "all flesh" with many opting for a translation

¹ It does not fall within the scope of this paper to determine the meaning of the phrase "works of the law" though it is important to be aware that the three major lines of interpretation are (1) legalism, characterised as gaining salvation by merit; (2) social boundary markers; (3) all the deeds commanded by the law. See Schreiner, Galatians, 159. As he highlights, the phrase is used some eight times in Rom 3:20,28; Gal 2:16 (3x); 3:2,5,10. In all contexts the issue of justification or receiving the Spirit are prominent and that the phrase is always contrasted with faith.
that is inherently negative that include: no one; no flesh; no single person; no mortal man; no man; or in German: niemand or kein Fleisch (see handout).

As a consequence commentators such as Bruce express the view that "Paul denied any saving significance to the law." ² Others such as de Boer who translates πᾶσα σὰρξ as "all flesh " expresses a similar view: " In Paul’s interpretation, moreover, the observance of the law and the faithful death of Jesus Christ are mutually exclusive rather than complementary when it comes to justification."³ In this he would be joined by Betz: " The flesh cannot be justified on its own terms and through its own efforts, because that would be “through works of the Torah “³

Sanders astutely observed that in examining the understanding of the Law in Galatians that “the subject of Galatians is not whether or not humans, abstractly conceived , can by good deeds earn enough merit to be declared righteous at the judgment; it is the condition on which Gentiles enter the people of God.”⁵ In other words the focus is not the value of the law for Jews who remain Jews, but the value of the law and its requirements for Gentile Christians.

What does Paul mean by "all flesh"? There is no contention about the likelihood that it has been Paul himself who has changed the words of Psa 142:3(LXX) from πᾶς ζῶν "everything that lives" to πᾶσα σὰρξ "all flesh" though Jewett in his study on Paul’s anthropological terms suggests that Paul may have been drawing on an apocalyptic tradition that preceded him as found in Ethiopian Enoch 81:5 " no flesh is righteous in the

² Bruce, Galatians, 140.
³ de Boer, Galatians, 144.
⁴ Betz, Galatians, 119.
⁵ Sanders, Paul, the Law, and the Jewish people, 18.
sight of the Lord." It is interesting to see that Jewett thinks \( \sigma\alpha\rho\xi \) was chosen because it already had a negative connotation in the Hellenistic world and this negative resonance was suitable for a polemical context such as this. It is not just that \( \sigma\alpha\rho\xi \) is viewed negatively but circumcised flesh in particular, with its claim that it is acceptable and righteous before God. Later, in examining Rom 3:20 he notes that scholars have not accounted all that well for the change made by Paul to the text of the Psalm and he suggests that \( \pi\alpha\sigma\alpha \sigma\alpha\rho\xi \) has double significance, that is, all flesh that is circumcised, and all flesh in a more global sense.

**Other dimensions and resonances for "all flesh"

I agree with Jewett that \( \pi\alpha\sigma\alpha \sigma\alpha\rho\xi \) is capable of being interpreted on a number of levels in Gal 2:16. Whether its primary resonance is that of circumcised flesh, and that viewed negatively, is yet to be seen.

If Jewett can cite Ethiopian Enoch then a counter proposal can be made for "all flesh" being interpreted more positively. At the outset it needs to be admitted that there are a number of occasions where the phrase is encountered in the Old Testament both negatively and positively. The situation of humanity before the flood narrative is sadly described: Gen 6:12" for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth." After the flood the original blessing of creation is renewed in Gen 8:17: "Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh—birds and animals and every creeping thing that creeps on the

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8 Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms*, 98.
earth—so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth."

The renewed covenant is clearly with all flesh (Gen 9:16).

It is worth making reference to texts from Isaiah where all flesh is used to speak of all humanity. Isa 49:26 proclaims that "all flesh will know that God is saviour" Isa 49:26, and Isa 66:23 expresses the hope that all flesh will come to worship. In the Psalms Psa 65:2 envisions a time when all flesh shall come to the one who hears prayers, and in Psa 136:25 God gives food to all flesh because God's love endures forever. In Ps 145:21 all flesh will bless his holy name. These are but a few examples but they serve to indicate that the phrase πᾶσα σάρξ need not be taken as referring to circumcised flesh negatively conceived, but to all humanity. Paul's desire is that all flesh will come to recognize Jesus as Messiah and his mission to both Jews and Gentile audiences seeks to achieve that, his point of contention with fellow Jews who were Christians was whether all flesh needed to take on the demands of the law.

"No one" or "all flesh"?

It is worth taking into account the fact Paul was more than capable of saying no one if that was the meaning he wanted to convey. Paul chose his words carefully and within the context of the letter to the Galatians, and elsewhere, there are examples that support the suggestion being made here (see handout).

Gal 3:15 Paul states "Brothers and sisters, I give an example from daily life: once a person's will has been ratified, no one (σύνεξις) adds to it or annuls it."
1 Cor 9:15 "But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing this so that they may be applied in my case. Indeed, I would rather die than that—no one (οὐδεὶς) will deprive me of my ground for boasting!"

2 Cor 7:2 "Make room in your hearts for us; we have wronged no one (οὐδένα), we have corrupted no one (οὐδένα), we have taken advantage of (οὐδένα)."

In Gal 3:11 Paul states "Now it is evident that no one (οὐδεὶς) is justified before God by the law; for "The one who is righteous will live by faith.""

Gal 3:11 makes its point clearly and it is the Achilles heel to what is proposed in this paper. Yes, in this context Paul says no one is justified before God by the law. It looks as cut and dried as it could possibly get. What needs to be considered, however, is the rhetorical context, intent, and the audience being addressed. Paul is speaking to Gentile Christians, his converts, his foolish Galatians and he his speaking directly to them. I suggest that Gal 2:16 (part of the propositio of the letter) has the role of clearing the ground that is - clarifying that all flesh will not be justified by the law, by Gal 3:11 Paul is in the midst of the argument with his wavering Christians and no one in this context means no one of you. Gal 3:11 provides a helpful seque into the challenge posed by both negative and positive statements about the value of the law.

**Dealing with positive and negative statements on the law**

There is no doubt that Paul is writing in a rhetorical context that is conflicted and the beginning of the letter shows that he has no difficulty consigning anyone who opposes his
Gospel to destruction (Gal 1:8,9). In honour and shame ripostes and exchanges no quarter was asked or given and yet we need to keep in mind that what is said in the context of battle is not what Paul might say in a more tranquil and dialogical setting. Comparing Romans and Galatians provides sufficient evidence for that since Paul will talk differently about the law when it is not the subject of intense debate, or when writing to a different audience. As Sanders observed in 1984 "The fact that there are "negative" and "positive" statements by Paul has always be observed"\(^{10}\) The challenge, of course, is dealing with that reality in a sufficiently sophisticated way to do justice with the not only the different ways in which the law is evaluated, but the impact that the different rhetorical contexts also bring to bear (see handout)

In Romans 3:1-2 "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much, in every way."

**Rom 2:13** "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified."

**Rom 3:31** "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law."

**Rom 9:4** They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises;

**Rom 9:5** to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever.

**Gal 3:21** "Is the law then opposed to the promises of God? Certainly not!"

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\(^{10}\) Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish people*, 10.
In the light of these positive assessments of the Jewish tradition from within the Pauline corpus a certain wariness is advisable in taking Gal 2:16 with its statement that all flesh will not be justified by works of the law as a blanket condemnation of the value of the law or as indicating that Paul was saying that faithful Jews would not be justified before God.

As previously mentioned Sanders has warned of the danger of taking Galatians as speaking of the value of the law in the abstract. If this judgment is correct it can shed light on the anomaly of the somewhat disconcerting ways in which Paul evaluates the role and value of the law in terms of it being a means of bringing a person into a right relationship with God.

Determining the conversation partner/s in a passage and its rhetorical intent is critical in determining the meaning of such passages.

**Sensitivity to context**

Since Sanders wrote an enormous amount of work has been done in exploring the letters of Paul from a rhetorical perspective and what has come much more clearly to the fore is that the letters of Paul need to be interpreted with sensitivity to their context. Who Paul is addressing in a rhetorical context needs to be borne in mind when examining the meaning of a passage. What Paul says about the status of the Jewish Law in one context can differ in another. It is only to be expected that since we have access to a wider range of Paul's letters than the first generation of Christians we make the most of this opportunity to compare one to another for consistency or development of thought. This runs the danger, however, of obscuring our focus on the individual letters and their specificity.

Looking at the rhetorical context helps us to identify that:
Paul is writing to a community that is vacillating, moving between Pauline praxis and accommodating the line concerning boundary markers, identity and the on-going role to be played by the Jewish Law for this community of Jews and Christians.

Since the readers/hearers/conversation partners are Christian if they are Gentile they have no particular interest in exploring the abstract question whether Jews can or will be saved at the last judgement on the basis of their allegiance to the Torah (whether that be in a wide sense, or with a particular focus on boundary markers). Whether Paul himself ever addressed that question himself is worthy of consideration.

Does it make a difference that the reader is a Christian? Yes, in many ways! The reason for this is that Paul is not seeking to convince a fellow Jew who is not a Christian to abandon obedience to the Torah saying that they will not be saved on the basis of circumcision and faithful adherence to the teachings and practices embedded in the scriptures. What he does want is that Christians, be they Gentile or Jewish, come to terms with the fact that the ground has changed with the coming of the Messiah and the discourse one has with a Jew who does not accept Jesus as Lord and Messiah is different to the one had with a person who has come to confess that Jesus is Lord.

Is Paul saying that no Jew will be saved? By no means! It is for this reason that translating the text as "not all flesh will be justified by works of the Law" is a better reading avoiding the otherwise inevitable conclusion that translating πᾶσα σάρξ as "no flesh" leads
to. Might it be that Gal 2:16 could simply be a statement of fact, that is, not all flesh - all humanity, would become Jewish? Notwithstanding the diaspora Paul was more than aware of the fact that Judaism was, and would continue to be, one religion among many. Despite Isaiah’s vision of all the nations coming to worship in Mount Zion in Isa 60, and Psa 86:9 speaking of all the nations worshipping the living God, this had not come to pass. Now, in light of the coming of the Messiah πᾶσα σὰρξ "all flesh" might have a pathway to being saved and justified.

Bibliography


