

ABSTRACT  
HUMANITY'S SALVIFIC DILEMMAS: DISENTANGLING  
THE PLIGHT IN ROMANS

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In this dissertation, I examine humanity's plight in Romans. If the gospel is "God's saving power for everyone who believes" (1:17), from whom or what does it save? While many scholars conclude that Paul presents a consistent meta-narrative of the problem, I argue that Romans preserves four differing salvific dilemmas that do not fit neatly together in the letter's ideological landscape. Adopting a structuralist description of Paul's cultural matrix, I advance this thesis on two levels of analysis: descriptive and explanatory.

Through a careful reading of select passages, I identify four distinct salvific problems in Romans—the Impiety (1:18–32), Cosmological (5:12–21), Flesh (7:7–25), and Hardening (11:1–36) Dilemmas. While there are conceptual overlaps, these dilemmas have different causes as well as differing views of God, anthropology, soteriology, and evil. On the explanatory level, I explain the letter's complexity in terms of Paul's varied background. These dilemmas draw their leading concepts from differing cultural contexts. The Impiety Dilemma aligns with Jewish-Hellenistic idol polemics; the Cosmological Dilemma with Jewish apocalyptic texts, the Flesh Dilemma with Greek philosophical traditions, and the Hardening Dilemma with the prophetic corpus. These milieus have been combined in Romans but not integrated, resulting in the letter's ideological complexity.

If valid, this thesis bears significance for understanding humanity's plight in Romans. The complexity of Paul's description is not the result of the work's genre (David E. Aune), a refraction of his Christology (E. P. Sanders), nor an integrated whole (James D. G. Dunn). Rather, the complexity is due to Paul's eclectic dispositions, which results in his bringing together distinctive ideas from differing cultural contexts. Beyond this, my thesis also has implications for other areas of Pauline research. *Typologically*, it challenges the scholarly practice of characterizing Paul's thought against just one background, e.g., apocalyptic or philosophical. *Literarily*, the incorporation of multiple historical milieus helps explain the letter's changes in style and vocabulary. *Theologically*, the multiplicity of dilemmas allows Romans to speak pastorally to a wide range of human experiences, both in its contemporaneous readings and later reception.