

New Testament Survey:

Romans

Sources:

Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Theoretical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004).

Few books can claim the impact of the book of Romans on Western Civilization. Romans was instrumental in St. Augustine's conversion. After reading Romans 13:13-14, Augustine wrote, "I had no wish to read more and no need to do so. For in an instant, as I came to the end of the sentence, it was as though the light of confidence flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled." (Augustine's *Confessions* (London: Penguin Books, 1961) p. 178). Martin Luther would read Romans and become convinced that salvation was accomplished solely by justification through faith (look up reference). This insight would lead him to challenge the Roman Catholic Church and centuries of doctrines. John Calvin would read Romans and become convinced that God's sovereign plan unfolded in time in spite of the worst attempts of evil to confound it.

### Paul's Letters

There were 2 general types of Hellenistic letters of which we're aware: the literary epistle and personal letters.

Hellenistic letters followed certain patterns in structure and wording. The structure of a Greek letter:

- The sender (in Paul's case, "I Paul")
- The recipient ("to the church...")
- Greeting. Paul took the typical Greek greeting, "Grace," and modified it according to the standard Christian greeting: "Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."
- Thanksgiving to the gods that the recipient was well. Paul also did this except for the letter to the Galatians.
- Body of letter
- Farewell.

Paul's letters follow this form, with only minor modifications.

There are several terms that need defining in Paul's letters.

- Justification: The event or process by which a man is made or declared to be righteous in the sight of God.
- Righteousness: From the Greek word *dikaiosynē*, the word means "right living." In the Old Testament, the word for righteousness, *ṣĕdāqâ*, meant conforming to a right standard. God alone sets the standard for righteousness; man must live according to God's standard.
- Faith: the human response to Divine truth, involving trust in God rather than mere intellectual assent.
- Grace: undeserved merit.
- Mercy: undeserved leniency.

### Chronology of Paul's letters:

|   |       |
|---|-------|
| 1 Thessalonians                                 | 50    |
| 2 Thessalonians                                 | 51    |
| Galatians                                       | 48-53 |
| 1 Corinthians                                   | 55    |
| 2 Corinthians                                   | 56    |
| Romans  | 57    |
| Ephesians, Philippians,<br>Colossians, Philemon | c. 60 |
| 1 Timothy, Titus                                | 65    |
| 2 Timothy                                       | 66    |

Paul was martyred under Nero's persecution in 66-67 A.D.

### **Paul's letter to the Romans**

As mentioned above, Paul wrote Romans sometime around 57 A.D., while he was in Corinth. Paul wrote Romans to prepare the Roman church for his visit on his way to Spain (15:28). Paul was writing to a church he did not found; therefore, he could not exert any authority over them without an introduction.

The letter to the Romans is Paul's longest letter. The letter itself is a tightly written argument for the necessity of God's righteousness in life, for the love of God demonstrated in Jesus' sacrifice, for the inclusion of the Jews in God's salvation plan, and for the continued presence of visible proof in Christians' lives that a spiritual birth has occurred in their lives.

#### *Textual problems*

One of the oldest copies of Romans has the ending doxology from 16:25-27 located at the end of chapter 14 and concludes the book there. However, this structure suggests the copy may have been from an altered version of the book. An early Church heretic, Marcion (c. 140), disputed the inclusion of the Old Testament in the Christian writings and did his best to expunge any references to the Old Testament from the Church. Marcion would not have like chapter 15. However, scholars believe sufficient evidence exists to trust the current version, especially given the lists of people Paul includes in chapter 16. If Paul is trying to establish relationships with the Roman churches, he would have doubtlessly referred to common friends and acquaintances.

#### *The Roman Church*

The decentralized nature of the Roman Church seems to have come from the fact there was no founding Apostle in Rome. The Church Father Ambrosiaster stated that the Roman Christians accepted Christianity without any notable miracles and without any Apostolic proclamation of the faith. (Witherington, p. 7; Paul's words, 15:20)

Chapter 16 seems to suggest that at least 5 house churches existed in Rome: one by Priscilla and Aquila (16:5); one including Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, and Hermas (16:14); one including Philologus, Julia, Olympas, and Nereus and his sister (16:15); the Christians in the house of Aristobolus (16:10); and the

Christians in Narcissus's household (16:11). Some of the people mentioned must have been rather wealthy, especially those of Aristobolus' home. Aristobolus was the grandson of Herod the Great and the brother of Herod Agrippa I. Josephus states that Aristobolus lived in Rome and was a friend of Claudius Caesar. Even though Aristobolus probably died in the 40's, his household continued. These are the people whom Paul addresses.

The churches in Rome were certainly a mixed lot. Jewish Christians certainly inhabited Rome. Under Claudius, roughly 10% of Rome's immediate population may have been Jewish. Claudius had expelled Jews from Rome in 49, but evidence suggests that the expulsion affected only Jewish leaders. Aquila and Priscilla settled in Corinth, where Paul met them (Acts 18). However, edicts such as the expulsion order often expired with the pronouncing Caesar, so many of the Jews may have returned to Rome after Claudius' death. Some scholars believe that the Jewish churches, still recovering from Claudius' decree, needed support from someone in their efforts to reunite with their Gentile counterparts.

However, most of the Roman Christians were Gentile. Paul constantly reinforces the unity of Jews and Gentiles in this letter. He also takes great pains to point out that God still has great things in mind for the Jews, and therefore Gentile Christians must not persecute Jewish nonbelievers (much less Jewish believers).

Paul also mentions several people by nicknames. These people would have been slaves in wealthy Roman houses. Slavery was an accepted part of Roman society, but slavery in Roman times was far different from its later circumstances. Many slaves in Rome grew wealthy in the service of their masters. However, slaves never achieved high social status.

Therefore, it seems that the Roman churches included both Jews and Gentiles, and both the upper and lower classes of Roman society.

## Romans' Structure

Source: Witherington, pp. 21-22

- I. Expanded epistolary opening: addresser and addressee (1:1-7a)
- II. Epistolary greeting (1:7b)
- III. Exordium: epistolary wish-prayer (1:8-10)
- IV. Narration (1:11-15)
- V. Proposition of the letter (1:16-17)
- VI. Proof of the Proposition
  - A. Argument I: The bankruptcy of pagan religious experience and God's judgment on it
    - a. The unbearable likeness ((1:18-32)
    - b. A critique of a judgmental Gentile hypocrite (2:1-16)
  - B. Argument II: Censoring a censorious Jewish teacher (2:17-3:20)
- VII. Recapitulation and expansion of the main thesis (3:21-31)
  - A. Argument III: Abraham as the forefather of a universal religion, of those who obtain righteousness by grace through faith (4:1-25)
  - B. Argument IV: The blessed consequences for all who have been set right by grace through faith (5:1-11)
  - C. Argument V: Adam as forefather of universal sin, suffering, and death; Christ as origin of universal grace, salvation, and life (5:12-13)
  - D. Argument VI: Shall sin, death, and the Law continue now that Christ has come?
    - a. Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? (6:1-24)
    - b. Shall we go on sinning since we are under grace, not Law? (6:15-7:6)
    - c. Shall we say that the Law is sin? Retelling Adam's tale (7:7-13)
    - d. Retelling the present human condition: life outside Christ (7:14-25)
  - E. Argument VII: Life in the Spirit now (8:1-17)
  - F. Argument VIII: Life of Christ in glory (concluding doxological praise) (8:18-39)
- VIII. Refutation (counter-arguments)
  - A. Argument IX: If salvation is by grace through faith in Christ and the Law is obsolete, has God abandoned His first chosen people? Has the word of God failed? Does Israel have a future? (with concluding doxology) (9:1-11:36)
  - B. Argument X: Unifying praxis and religion for Gentiles and Jews in Christ: true worship and true love (12:1-21)
  - C. Argument XI: Unifying praxis and witness: submission to authorities, payment of debts (13:1-14)
  - D. Argument XII: Unifying praxis and discernment: acceptance, not judging of other believers (with concluding doxology) (14:1-15:13)
- IX. Summarization (with recapitulation of 1:16-17) (15:14-21)
- X. Epistolary reference to travel plans (with concluding doxology) (15:22-23)
- XI. Concluding epistolary greetings and instructions (16:1-16)
- XII. Supplemental summarization to Jewish Christians against divisions, reinforcing arguments X-XII (with concluding benediction) (16:17-20)
- XIII. Concluding epistolary greetings from coworkers (possibly with concluding benediction in v. 24) (16:21-23)
- XIV. Final benediction (16:25-27)