

Lesson One

THE GOSPEL TO ROME

AUTHORSHIP

"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ"

The Apostle Paul addressed his longest recorded epistle to Christians who lived in the Imperial city of Rome. Many of the original readers of the letter had probably been Christians for many years. So Paul's letter is not sent to introduce the ABC's of the Gospel but to give reassurance to Christians concerning God's plan of redemption which had been in His mind before the world was created and to indicate that the divine program was right on target. All was proceeding just as God had planned.

There is no question but that this epistle was written by Paul. Even the hyper-critical skeptics of a generation ago at the Tubingen school of Germany gave Romans, along with the two Corinthian letters, as well as Galatians, to Paul. These "big four" epistles are said to be so certainly Pauline that they are used as yardsticks to judge the authorship of all other epistles bearing Paul's name. The vocabulary, style, and theology of other letters must match that of the "big four" if they are to be recognized as Pauline. It is refreshing to turn to a letter bearing

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Paul's name and not be forced by skeptics to spend precious time in the defense of the authenticity and genuineness of the book. Charles Hodge says of the book of Romans, "There is therefore, no book in the Bible, and there is no ancient book in the world, of which the authenticity is more certain than that of this epistle."

Let no one misunderstand. Acceptance of Pauline authorship does not necessarily mean to all persons that the book is now in the form in which it was originally written or that it was inspired. Many who accept Pauline authorship of Romans would categorically reject any concept of divine inspiration of any book of the Bible. Some would suggest that Chapters Nine through Eleven were not a part of the original letter to Rome, but that that section of Romans was written separately by Paul or as a part of some other letter. It has been suggested also that Chapter Sixteen with its greeting to twenty-six individuals was originally the close of the letter to the Ephesians and not a part of the original Roman document. The argument is that Paul spent three years at Ephesus and would know many people there. Having never been to Rome, it is claimed he would not have personally known two dozen persons who were residents of Rome. The truth is, however, that the list of greetings begins with Aquila and Prisca whom he met at Corinth on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1, 2). This suggests the possibility that during his travels he came to know all those whom he greeted with the exception of his own relatives who were "in Christ" before Paul (16:7). At Ephesus Paul labored "night and day," teaching "publicly, and from house to house" (Acts 20:20, 31). He must have had a multitude of friends and meaningful relationships there. How tactless it would have been to write to a church where he had labored so long and where so many were known and loved and mention only twenty-four by name. It may be courteous to greet only deacons and bishops (Philippians 1:1) when writing to a church where one has served for a long time, but surely it could not be construed to be gracious to mention a few by name but exclude countless others who are known just as well as those who were greeted. The Roman epistle is indeed intact. Chapters Nine through Eleven follow the first eight chapters of doctrine with the most natural progression of thought. These three chapters present a very logical conclusion in defense of God as having functioned in history according to His plan just as the Old Testament prophets had predicted. The sixteenth chapter probably contains greetings to all the individuals Paul knew personally in Rome, and that is reasonable, courteous, and acceptable procedure. No manuscript evidence can be produced to connect the sixteenth chapter with any other epistle. We conclude that the entire book of Romans as found in our Bibles is essentially the same as Paul's autographed original of Romans.

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DESTINATION

"To all that are in Rome"

Many attempts have been made to determine the nationality of the Christians in Rome to whom Paul wrote. The results of such efforts fail to support any one view to the extent that it is unquestionable. If scholars would speculate as to the national constituency of the Roman church, and then proceed to an unbiased exegesis of the text, no more would need to be said on that subject. The fact is, however, that exegetes are prone to rather arbitrarily posit a church in Rome with a certain ethnic membership and then proceed to interpret the letter to Rome in light of its supposed membership—Jew or Gentile. It is best procedure, therefore, to note various views and come to some conclusion before proceeding to further study of Romans.

Theodore Zahn seems to have no question in his mind but that the Roman church membership was basically Jewish and that the Gentile Christians constituted a comparatively small minority. Zahn notices a direct address to those called Jews in 2:17. He concludes that 7:1-6 could only be written to those who, like the author, had lived under the law and that "no rational man could possibly say this of native Gentiles." Aquila, he notes, was a Jew, and Jewish kinsmen of Paul are living in Rome. Extensive treatment of the law and Gospel early in the epistle and expression of deep concern for the welfare of the Jews in Chapters Nine through Eleven are held to be further evidence that original readers were Jews. One may respond to Zahn that Paul does address Jews, but he also addressed Gentiles (11:13). It is not necessary to conclude that 7:1-6 could only be addressed to Jews. Numerous Gentile proselytes were living under the law and were very well informed about the Old Testament Scriptures. "Strangers of Rome, both Jews and proselytes," were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost in A.D. 30 (Acts 2:10) when the church was born.

F. B. Meyer holds that the church in Rome was founded by converts of Paul and that the membership of the church was mainly Gentile. Godet agrees with this view of the constituency of the church, and Charles Erdman states flatly that the church was Gentile. Charles Hodge characterizes the church as being "schismatic" and states, "Conflicts now and again arose, both regarding doctrine and discipline, between the believers of the two races." William Sanday holds what is probably the better balanced view suggesting that the Christian community of Rome was mixed "embracing in substantial proportions both Jews and Gentiles." Jewish population in Rome was increasing just previous to the founding and growth of Christianity. Under Augustus Caesar, at the beginning of the Empire in 27 B.C., there were forty thousand

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Jews in Rome, but under the reign of Tiberius which began in A.D. 14, numbers of Jews in Rome had doubled. There were at least seven synagogues in Rome when Josephus wrote about the Jews during the first century. Seneca, the teacher of Nero, speaking of the influence of the Jews in Rome, wrote, "The vanquished have given laws to the victors."

B. K. Kuiper notes that in the time of Christ there were five or six times as many Jews outside of Palestine as there were in Palestine. Freedom of circulation and movement in the Roman Empire was greater than it had been at any previous time. The magnet of economic opportunity drew many Jews to Rome.

In light of all the historic information available, as well as the content of Romans, Sanday and Headlam suggest the safe view that Paul did not have "any exact statistics before him as to the composition of the church to which he was writing. The church is generally Gentile but at the same time, it contains so many born Jews that he (Paul) passes easily and freely from one body to the other."

THE TIME OF WRITING

It was probably late winter or early spring of A.D. 58 when Paul dictated this epistle to Tertius (16:22). Paul was on the third mission tour and intended to winter at Corinth (I Corinthians 16:6). From the history recorded in Acts, it is learned that Paul left Ephesus, passed through Macedonia and arrived at Greece where he remained for three months (Acts 20:1-3). Because a plot was laid against him with intent to take his life, Paul was forced to retrace his steps into Macedonia rather than sail for Palestine where he probably would like to have arrived for the Passover season. Instead it was after the Passover that he sailed from Philippi. Just a glance at a map tells us that Luke obviously meant that they sailed from Neapolis, the port town of Philippi. The latter was located some ten miles inland. Neapolis was to Philippi what Cencreae was to Corinth. This would be similar language as used by those who say they are flying from the Cincinnati, Ohio airport. Actually the municipal airport of Cincinnati is across the Ohio River and located in the state of Kentucky.

Now that the Passover was past, Paul was in haste that he might arrive in Palestine for the Feast of Pentecost (Acts 20:6, 16). The Passover was always celebrated in the spring of the year and frequently in April. Paul was in Greece three months before the Passover, and if the epistle was written while Paul was there, it must have been penned some time between January and April. It is admitted that A.D. 58 is an arbitrary selection on the part of the author as the year of writing, but

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that choice is predicated upon the chronology of numerous events of the Apostolic Age and secular dates concurrent with Paul's life. The council on circumcision is pivotal and is placed at A.D. 51; the first mission tour is thought to have begun following the death of Herod (Acts 12:20-23), in A.D. 44, the second in A.D. 52, and the third journey was undertaken in A.D. 54 or 55. On the basis of this chronology of events there is very little acceptable latitude for movement of the time of writing of Romans either direction very far from A.D. 58. Floyd Hamilton's work, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 18, 19 is recommended for those who wish to know secular dates which are used to erect a chronological outline for the whole of Paul's Christian life.

LOCATION OF WRITING

The question was raised above as to where Paul was located when Romans was written. If he was not in Greece at the time of writing, then one guess as to his location is as good as another. There are no allusions to any persons, incidents, or geographical locations other than those associated with Corinth. Some, like Godet, suggest the writing must have been done during the three-year span of time Paul labored at Ephesus. The letter is so long, profound, and orderly, that claim is laid that the book reflects the preparation which Paul made for his lectures delivered at the school of Tyrannus at Ephesus (Acts 18:8-10). Such claims seem to wholly ignore the fertile mind and mental prowess of the apostle Paul without even a mention of the work of the Holy Spirit in supervising the production of Scripture (II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:21). The internal evidence for the place of writing is as follows:

1. Geographic (16:1)

Cenchreae, the hometown of Phoebe, was the port town for Corinth. All of the commerce of the Mediterranean which flowed to the great city of Corinth passed through the port of Cenchreae. Corinth, in fact, was the only important city in that area.

2. Persons (16:23)

Erastus was sent ahead of Paul into Macedonia. Paul then left Asia, went to Macedonia and on to Greece. He probably took Erastus with him from Macedonia to Greece. II Timothy 4:20 informs that Erastus remained at Corinth. Notice that Erastus was not mentioned as being among those who accompanied Paul when he left Greece (Acts 20:4).

Gaius, in whose home Paul resided during his stay at Corinth, was one of two whom Paul baptized at Corinth (I Corinthians 1:14). If this is the same Gaius who traveled with Paul, he is not originally from Corinth but was native to the city of Derbe and the country of Macedonia (Acts 19:29; 20:4).

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3. Event (15:25-28)

I Corinthians was penned before Romans was written. A common date cited for the year in which I Corinthians was written is A.D. 56. It is safe to conclude that at least a year before Paul visited Corinth he had instructed the Christians there to put together an offering for the poor saints in Judea (I Corinthians 16:1-4). He wanted them to pool their offerings weekly so the sum would be in one place when he arrived, ready to be carried to Judea by himself and other trustworthy persons. If it were not for this specific responsibility to return east to Jerusalem with these contributions, Paul would have traveled west to Rome and on to Spain. Paul must have rejoiced at the giving response of the Corinthians, and the mention of the Corinthian's fulfillment of his directives tie the writing of Romans to Corinth. All internal evidence points to Corinth as the place where Paul was ministering when he took time to write to Rome.

OCCASION FOR WRITING

When beginning a study of any New Testament epistle, the question must be asked, "What was the occasion which prompted the author to write"? Every New Testament letter was called forth by specific historic circumstances and needs. Numerous factors are suggested as explanation for the writing of Romans at the particular time Paul wrote. Perhaps the most obvious reason for writing when he did was that Phoebe was going to Rome. Paul wanted to commend her to the Christian society at Rome, and she would carry his letter. Obviously Paul would especially expect those at Rome to whom he sent personal greetings to be hospitable and as helpful to her as was possible. A second very obvious reason for writing is that he intended to pass through Rome on his way to Spain, and he wished to inform them of his plans and seek their support. It would be agreed on all hands that writing previous to a visit would be a friendly, courteous thing to do. If, however, that is all Paul intended, Romans is by far the most lengthy, profound, social note ever written. Some think his aim in writing was solely monetary, citing as proof Paul's reference to the offering (15:25, ff.) as a wise, cunning move on Paul's part to gain good will and finances. Those who make such a suggestion are either uninformed or willfully ignore biographical facts about Paul. He has already preached the Gospel throughout all the territory from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern Albania and Yugoslavia). When necessary to support himself by making tents, he did so. This self-sacrificing Apostle could write to those who had first-hand knowledge about him and his work and say that he did not eat bread for nothing, but in labor

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and travail worked night and day that he might not be a burden to anyone (II Thessalonians 3:7, 8). Paul's motives were such that he invested tears (Acts 20:19, 31) and never coveted any man's silver, gold, or apparel. With his own hands he supplied necessities of life (Acts 20:33-35). Be reminded again that the content of these last two cited passages from Acts were spoken to elders with whom Paul worked personally at Ephesus. They could easily put the lie to such personal testimony if it was not true. It is in that context that Paul gives a quotation from our Lord not recorded in any gospel: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." Another claimed reason for the writing of the epistle is that an anti-Pauline element in the church at Rome occasioned the letter. The basic claim is that Paul wrote to alleviate some of the antagonism towards himself. By writing he would make a good impression and smooth the way for a favorable reception and visit. Those who promote this line of thought usually suggest that the Roman church stems from Jewish influence out of Jerusalem as early as the birthday of the church on the day of Pentecost, A.D. 30 (Acts 2:10) and that the church was not friendly to Paul, because of his being especially associated with the Gentile Christians. The further claim is that Rome would have received a very early, provincial form of Christianity like that known to Peter. Paul, in contrast, is said to preach a late, Hellenistic gospel different from that preached by Peter and the early church. Galatians 2:6-10 is erroneously cited as proof of such a theory. Numerous Scriptures militate against such a theory. The content of Galatians 1:6-10 cannot be ignored and Paul argues strenuously in Romans 3:29, 30 that there is one God and one plan of salvation by which Jews and Gentiles shall be saved. There is not a shred of evidence in the New Testament to support the dual concept of a provincial Petrine gospel as distinct from a universal Pauline gospel. The theory is pure speculation.

Turning back to positive reasons for the writing of Romans, it should be remembered that Rome was the center of the world and thus was of tremendous import to the future of Christianity. It was needful for that influential metropolis to have an orderly and comprehensive statement of the Christian faith. It is highly doubtful that Peter founded the church in Rome. He is not mentioned among those greeted in the sixteenth chapter and if Peter was there, Paul, on the basis of his own principle of operation (15:20, 21) would not have longed for years to go there (15:22, 23). Some suggest that not only was there an absence of apostolic leadership in Rome, but that elders are not once mentioned in the epistle. It is my opinion that Romans 12:6-8 reflects a very well-organized church in Rome and that the phrase, "he that ruleth" may very well reflect the presence of elders (cf. I Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:7, 17). Meyer says, "Especially may the existence of Presbyters, which

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was essential to church organization (Acts 14:23) be regarded as a matter of course." Paul must have felt personally responsible for the church in Rome and perhaps he had sent some of his own converts and co-workers there to minister until the time when he could join them personally. With that time growing ever longer he sought in some degree to substitute for his presence by writing. Thus, Paul would do with pen what he had not been able to do in person. It is probable that a combination of influences caused Paul to write the letter to Rome at the particular time he did so.

The book reflects no major doctrinal problems in the Church at Rome and the mention of division so late in the letter (16:17) indicates that divisive false teachers were not a main cause for writing. Romans is not a polemic (attack) and neither is it an apologetic (defense). Rather than either of those kinds of writing the book is correctly described as didactic (teaching).

Whatever the occasion for writing, the letter is of such a calibre that it has elicited praise from every quarter.

Coleridge: Romans is "the profoundest book in existence."

Luther: "This Epistle is the chief book of the N.T., the purest gospel."

Meyer: "The greatest and richest of all the apostolic works"

Schaff: "Epistle of Epistles"

Erdman: ". . . the supreme masterpiece of the great apostle. It is a marvel of intellectual acumen, of logical power and of spiritual insight."

Lindski: "Most dynamic of all N.T. letters"

Barth: "All Christian doctrine must be oriented to the book of Romans."

READER'S REVIEW:

1. What is the major purpose for the writing of Romans?
2. List the "big four" epistles that are granted to be Pauline even in liberal circles.
3. What are the questions raised about the composition of Romans in its autographed state and in its present state?
4. What is the content of Chapter Sixteen which causes some to assign it originally to some other epistle?
5. Which of the following views of the membership of the Roman Church would you support and why?
 - a. The Church at Rome was mainly Gentile.
 - b. The Church at Rome was mainly Jewish.
 - c. The Church at Rome was probably quite equally divided between Jews and Gentiles.

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6. Cite all possible evidence pointing to the letter as being written in late winter or early spring.
7. What is the basis for the claim that Romans was written in A.D. 58?
8. State three lines of internal evidence advanced in support of Paul being located at Corinth when he wrote.
9. State those factors which you think to be most influential in causing Paul to write Romans.
10. Cite two claimed motivating factors for writing Romans which are critical of Paul and give a defense of the apostle.
11. What is claimed about the difference in the Gospel as preached by Peter and Paul? What is your answer to this claim?
12. Cite three different persons or groups of persons who are said to have been founders of the Church at Rome.
13. What evidence is there in the epistle that the Church was quite well-organized when Paul wrote to Rome?
14. Define the terms "polemic," "apologetic," and "didactic."
15. What is the element in the praise of Luther for Romans which may cast some adverse reflection on the rest of the New Testament?