

THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

Introductory Matters

The Author of the Epistle: That the Apostle Paul is the writer (1:1) has been uncontested. The scribe or *amanuensis* was Tertius (16:22). It seems clear that the style of the letter fits the style and grammar of Galatians, a letter Paul composed (6:11) in which he indicated that Tertius took dictation. Paul appears to have suffered from a disease that affected his eyes when he labored among the Galatians (4:12-15), requiring help in subsequent letters.

The Date of the Epistle: Several factors indicate that Paul dictated the epistle at the end of the third missionary journey, 56 or 57 AD.

1. According to Rom. 1:10-15 and 15:22-23 Paul had not labored among the recipients of the letter (The same situation existed with the epistle to the Colossians). Scholars think Paul arrived there (Acts 28:14-16) in February 60 AD as a prisoner and was put under house arrest.
2. According to Rom 15:25-26, Paul planned to go to Jerusalem with a love offering (1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9) raised by the churches in Macedonia and Achaia and then hoped to come to Rome. This would place the writing in the context of Acts 20:3-6 before he departed from Greece for Jerusalem. Paul was arrested in Jerusalem in May 57.
3. According to Romans 15:18-24, Paul believed that his ministry in the East was ending, having preached from Illyricum to Jerusalem; he was looking toward a new mission field in Spain. The book was written in a transitional time in his work. Spain, in Paul's day, was considered the end of the world.

The Origin of the Epistle: The most likely location for the writing of the letter was the city of Corinth.

1. The time frame of three months in Greece during the third missionary journey fits cogently.
2. Paul mentions a Gaius with whom he is staying, who also is the host of a church in his home (16:23). Paul baptized a Gaius in Corinth (1 Cor 1:14).
3. Paul also mentions an Erastus (16:23) whom he may have sent to Ephesus during the third journey (Acts 19:21-22; 2 Timothy 4:20). It is known from an inscription that a man of his name was the city's treasurer.
4. Paul commends to the Romans a woman, Phoebe (16:1), from Cenchrea, Corinth's seaport to the west. Some think she carried the letter to Rome since Paul asks the Romans to welcome her. She is first in a list suggesting a link with Corinth.

The Christian Community in Rome: It is evident from various texts that Paul was not a founder of the church or house churches (Romans 16 mentions three) in the empire's capital. Paul did not

plan to remain in Rome for an extended period; he was not interested in labor where as others had already commenced the work (15:20).

1. It is reasonable to conclude that Roman Jewish Christians brought the gospel back with them from Jerusalem following the Day of Pentecost (May 33). Acts 2:10 mentions “visitors from Rome.” However, others have suggested that the establishment of house churches in Rome was a production of early outreach from Antioch. What is clear is that Paul was not involved in the founding of churches in Rome (1:13).
2. The fourth century churchman, Ambroaster, notes that the Christian presence began in the synagogues.
3. The Roman historian Suetonius in the *Life of Claudius* notes that the emperor expelled the Jews from Rome because of riots over “Chrestus,” likely a reference to Christ. This seems confirmed by Luke (Acts 18:2) in his comment that Aquila and Priscilla were forced to leave Rome because of the Jews (49 AD). They fled to Corinth where they associated with Paul on his second missionary journey. They later returned to Rome after the expulsion edict was revoked upon Claudius’ death in 54 AD (16:3-5).
4. It would also seem that the house churches were composed of many Gentiles and some Jewish Christians. With the return of Christ-followers, after Claudius’ reign, it is reasonable to conclude that the focal point was no longer the Jewish synagogue, but scattered, low-profile house assemblies.
5. Some scholars have identified three groups in the Roman house churches: legalists, who believed that salvation was a product of human achievement; libertines, who abandoned law-keeping entirely; and spiritualists, who took pride in thinking they were superior to other Christians for one reason or another.
6. From the greetings that Paul extends (16:3-16), we glean that some in the churches were older in the faith than Paul (v. 7), some used their homes as meeting places suggesting some wealth (v. 5), and many were of the slave class.

The Occasion and Purpose of the Epistle: Lacking a clear statement of purpose or purposes, the reason for writing must be judged by the contents of the letter.

1. The letter was written at the most basic level to introduce Paul to the house churches since he was known personally by only a few in Rome.
2. More specifically, Paul was in a period of ministry transition. He felt his work in the eastern regions of the empire was complete (15:19) and he was anxious for a new field of service, Spain. This required financial assistance (15:24), so he wanted the churches to get to know him and his work. It is, in part, an attempt by Paul to solicit them on to his sponsors list! Further, he wanted their prayer support because of the dangers involved in first going to Jerusalem to take the love offering from the churches in Macedonia (15:30-33).
3. Along with the above-mentioned reasons, Paul wanted the Romans to understand the gospel that he preached (1:15) and its implications (12-15), to guard against false teachers (16:17-19).
4. Less obvious than the other reasons is the apostle’s attempt to deal with tensions between Jews and Christians, Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The issue has

to do with the relationship of the Old Covenant to the New Covenant community. Is the Gentile better than the Jew from God's perspective since he has opened their hearts to the gospel (1-3)? Should the Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian be required to obey the law for God's favor (3-4)? If salvation is apart from the law, is sanctification, our walk with God, also apart from the law (5-8)? Does God forget His promises when His people disobey? How do you explain what has happened to Israel? Is He finished with them (9-11)? How should Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians conduct themselves toward one another (12-15)? Paul may have put into writing the issues he hammered out against the Judaizers in Galatia and Corinth. Moo writes, "Paul...is writing to correct the Gentiles' indifference, even arrogance, toward the Jewish minority at the same time that he tries to show the Jews that they must not insist on the law as the normative factor in the church" (*Epistle to the Romans*, 19). Paul writes: "Do not be arrogant but be afraid" of the Gentile treatment of Jewish Christians (11:20).

The Nature of the Epistle: While there is evidence that Romans is a typical letter (an opening, 1:1-15, and a closing, 15:14-16:27), the unique feature is the long, sustained argument stretching from 1:18-11:36. It lacks personal references to any problems among his readers, has several sections in which he handles possible objections, and nothing has a local scope. It is best to call the "letter" a tractate or treatise.

1. The tractate is historically situated; it is rooted in mid-first-century issues.
2. It is composed of a long, single argument dealing with Old Covenant/New Covenant, Jewish Christian/Gentile Christian, Judaism/Christian issues.
3. The emphasis in the epistle is on the gospel, not the Roman Christians and their needs.
4. It is also clear that the epistle is not a summary of Paul's theology; it has to do with the gospel, not issues such as the Lord's return, the work of the Holy Spirit, the Church, or Christology in a formal sense.

The Theme of the Epistle: The theme of the epistle is the gospel, the good news that God has granted His righteousness as a gift. The term "gospel" is found eleven times in the book, three in the introduction (vv. 1, 9, 16). The pronoun "it, referring to the gospel is found in vv. 16, 17). It is what was promised in the Old Testament (v. 2). Traditionally, scholars have pointed to Romans 1:16-17 as the central text. "...In it (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed."

The Outline of the Epistle: The epistle contains an introduction (greetings, an explanation of Paul's delay in coming, and the central theme), a conclusion (future plans, greetings, and a doxology), and an argument consisting of four parts.

- I. Introduction, 1:1-17
- II. Argument, 1:18-15:13
 - A. The Great Need for the Gospel: the Universality of Sin, 1:18-3:20
 - B. The Great Provision in the Gospel: Divine Salvation, 3:21-8:39
 1. Deliverance from the guilt of sin: Justification, 3:21-4:25
 2. Deliverance from the power of sin: Sanctification, 5:1-8:17

- 3. Deliverance from the presence of sin: Glorification, 8:18-30
 - 4. Conclusion: The security of the believer, 8:31-39
 - C. The Defense of the Gospel Promises: God keeps His promises even when it does not look possible, 9:1-11:36
 - D. The Transformation that the Gospel Demands, 12:1-15:13
- III. Conclusion, 15:14-16:27

The Original Reader's Perspective: It may be helpful to think about the book from the perspective of a first century reader, the original audience. Mostly likely, since it is frequently addressed in the New Testament, the most poignant tension in the earliest churches was the relationship of the Jew to the Gentile in the New Covenant era. Has the Jew been replaced by the Gentile? Is the Gentile required to conform to Old Testament Judaism? Since Christianity is rooted and nourished in Old Testament Judaism, what is the place of the Jew in the new economy? Is the Jew to be denigrated in the new family and the Gentile subservient in it or is the Jew subordinated to the Gentile constituency? The practical issue is the possibility of Jewish superiority and Gentile arrogance. These are very practical issues having to do consequentially with moral conduct in the assembly of the churches. Paul's answer is that neither person-group is subservient; all are equal, the Law has fulfilled its condemnatory purpose, and it remains binding in many, not all, of its content. This issue Paul addresses and can be used as a structural approach to the letter.

- I. Introduction: the good news for all, both Gentile and Jew, 1:1-17
- II. The universality of human sinfulness, both Gentile and Jew, 1:18-3:20
 - "...all who have sinned without the Law will Perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law (2:12)."
 - ".... Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin (3:9)."
- III. The universality of redemption for the Gentile and Jew by grace apart from works, 3:21-4:25
 - "...that the promise may be certain to all descendants. Not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (4:16)."
- IV. The universality of struggle in the redemptive state with the remainders of sin for the Gentile and the Jew (5:1-8:33).
 - "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death (8:2)."
 - "... if you by the Spirit are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (8:13)."
- V. The universality of God's promises. God has not forgotten His ancient people, having granted the promise of a renewal for them, 9:1-11:36
 - "... do not be arrogant toward the branches... (11:18)."
 - ".... Do not be conceited, but fear (11:20)."
- VI. The universality and moral necessity for the Gentile and the Jew life in harmony, 12:1-15:13
- VII. Conclusion, 15:14-16:27

Commentary and Comment

I. Prologue, 1:1-17

Paul's introduction is personal. The words "I," "me," and "my" occur over twenty times in the opening verses. Chapter 15 contains another deeply personal section. Here he explains his delay in coming; there he relates plans for his coming. Between these two chapters is the account of his personal struggles in chapter 7.

A. The Salutation, 1:1-7

The salutation is the longest in Paul's writings perhaps because he did not know these people, nor did they know him, though they shared acquaintances in the work (16:3-16).

1. From whom: Paul, v. 1

Paul refers to himself in three ways: his status, a slave (the first time in his writings [only elsewhere in Philippians and Titus] he refers to himself as a slave), revealing his estimate of Christ (meaning the promised one or Messiah; it is a title); his calling ("called" denotes the divine initiative), an apostle (as was Abraham from heaven [Acts 7:2-3], suggesting his authority by divine appointment); and his work ("set apart" to preach the gospel, the Damascus Road experience [Acts 9]). To call himself both a slave (in this instance, one who sells himself into servitude voluntarily) and an apostle is a stark contrast between those with no standing and the privileged. In the Old Testament, the concept behind being a slave of the Lord was not that of drudgery or deprivation, but one of honor (thus is why some translations use bondservant rather than slave; "slave" does not denote the voluntary nature of Paul's service). Rome, however, was called "the city of slaves," the term denoting things vastly different than Paul's "slavery".

The phrase "of God" can be read in two ways: it can mean the message that comes from God or the message that is about God. Considering the verses that follow, the first reading is more likely. It is the message that came from God. The point is that God called Paul into service as an apostle.

The word "gospel" comes from two words, good and message. It is Paul's message to convey, but God's message in origin.

2. Concerning whom: Jesus Christ, vv. 2-6

These verses are a parenthesis or excursus by the apostle. Paul expands his comment on the gospel (v.1). The "gospel" is the argument in the letter; it is not the point of the writing; the letter is about consequences. The verses are one long, complex sentence often divided in translation to facilitate comprehension.

a. The roots of the gospel: the prophets, v. 2

While the gospel is good news, it is not new news. The gospel was promised in the Hebrew Scriptures (Genesis 3:15, the seed of the

woman; Daniel 7, the son of man; Isaiah 53, the suffering servant). This is the only time that Paul uses the phrase “Holy Scriptures.” He probably has no specific text in mind. Cf. also 3:21.

b. The content of the gospel: The Son, vv. 3-4

The gospel concerns “God’s son,” a term that means participation in the divine nature. It is one of the most significant titles of Jesus; He is divine. “Son of David” suggests His humanity, but kingliness as well; he is the God/man God’s son is the divine means of the recall of humanity from the separation explained in Genesis 3. Three antithetical clauses describe Christ:

The phrase, “spirit of holiness,” is difficult because it appears nowhere else in the New Testament. Since the section contains three contrastive statements of His humanity and His deity, it must refer in some way to His deity. I take it that it refers to His holiness.

Speaking apologetically of the divine/human Christ, C.S. Lewis stated, “A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse (*Mere Christianity*, 41).”

c. The aim of the gospel: the obedience resulting from faith, vv. 5-6

Is the “we (v. 5)” the apostles as a whole or is “apostleship” a nontechnical term for the missionary team? The context does not help us, but “apostleship” does. He is speaking of the collectivity of the apostles, identifying with them.

“Obedience of faith” can be taken two ways: “obedience which consists in faith” or “obedience that comes from faith.” The first would make faith and obedience synonyms, which is sometimes the case in the New Testament; the second would see obedience as the response of faith (Abraham who “by faith...obeyed” [Heb 11:8]). Either would work, but the second seems more contextually valid. The NIV reads it this way (“from faith”).

The gospel is for all; it is universal in scope (Jews and Gentiles), “all” kinds of people, not merely the Jews. Who are the “all”? Everyone who sees their great need of forgiveness, recognizes that Jesus alone is altogether beautiful in His person and offices (prophet, priest, and king), humbles themselves to accept the gift from God in Jesus, and acquiesces to new priorities because of Him.

As Paul stated that he was “called (v.10),” he says the same of the Roman Christians. All are called, though the manner of their service may not be the same. Paul was called to proclaim the faith that is in Jesus; the Romans we called to receive it.

3. To whom: “the beloved of God in Rome”, v.7
Paul does not address himself to the church in Rome (“to all that are in Rome”). This may suggest what is later implied (chapter 16); there were several house churches in the city at that time. Further, this unusual address suggests that he was not intimately acquainted with them. “Beloved of God” is only here in Paul’s writings; it describes the Romans in terms of the attitude of God toward them, loved and called.

“Grace and peace” are common in the letters of the day as salutations. Grace is the basis of true peace. Peace is not the absence stress, fear, or anxiety; it is to be filled with a sense of the blessing of God.

B. The Situation, 1:8-15

In effect, what Paul accomplished in the previous verse is explain his calling and message. Having spoken of himself, Paul addresses his readers.

1. Paul’s prayer for the Romans, vv. 8-12
 - a. His commendation of the Romans, v. 8
The use of “first” is interesting since there is no “second.” One transliterates the phrase this way, “I must begin by telling you...” Ten of Paul’s thirteen letters begins with a note of thankfulness.

Since Rome was the center of the empire, it is reasonable that people coming to the capital or leaving would have been exposed to the gospel. The strategic location of the city, and its great importance, made it a beacon for the proclamation of Christ.

- b. His prayers for the Romans, v. 9
So sincere is Paul in saying that he prays for the Christians in Rome that he calls God as his witness.
 - c. His prayer for himself regarding the Romans, vv.10-12
Though a man of many acquaintances, he made it a point to pray for those he had not met; he did so with constancy and earnestness.
 - 1) The reason for the prayer, v. 10
 - 2) The twofold content of the prayers, vv. 11–12
The apostle’s longed to come and impart to them a “spiritual gift” (“moral quality,” v.11). It means that he wanted to be a means of blessing to them, and himself as a result (e.g., mutual comfort and encouragement). Verse 12 seems to explain the meaning of v. 11.

The phrase “some spiritual gift” is troublesome. People do not “impart” spiritual gifts; God alone bestows them (Rom 12:6,

Eph 4:11, I Cor 12:11). The phrase must denote the consequence of the use of spiritual giftedness; that is, encouragement toward spiritual growth.

2. Paul's desire to visit the Romans, v. 13
His missionary work is complete in and around Greece (15:17-22). By adding the phrase "as among the other Gentiles," he suggests that the Roman Christians were mostly Gentile.

Since the "harvest among you" is written to Roman Christians, it seems reasonable to see the "harvest" as strengthening the believers (see vv.11-12). To gain a deepening understanding of the gospel is how Christians grow!

3. Paul's debt to the world, vv. 14-15
The apostle makes two confessions: "I am a debtor" and "I am ready." The first speaks of obligation, the second of volition.

"Greeks and barbarians" likely means all Gentile humanity though divided into two groups, the cultured and the uncouth, the educated and the illiterate. "Wise and foolish" probably refers to the same two groups.

The term "gospel" is inclusive of the whole range of Christian truths from redemption to glorification.

- C. The Subject: The Gospel, 1:16-17
These verses consist of four subordinate clauses, each supporting or illuminating the one before it. These compose the theme of the letter. In a sense Paul concludes the introduction in the manner he began the letter; he again focuses on the gospel (vv.2-6). Here the emphasis is not so much on the person who is the center of the gospel, but the accomplishments of His person and work (the gift of divine righteousness).

Mounce says that these verses are pivotal New Testament verses because they state concisely and unequivocally the essence of the good news that is the gospel. The righteousness that is required for the acquittal of sinner is not that of a reformed sinner, but the very righteousness that is God's.

1. The power in it, v.16
The "for" states the reason he is eager to preach in Rome; it is also the third "I am" statement, "I am not ashamed." (Do I detect a three-point "I am" talk here?) The reason for his unabashed desire to preach is that the message saves. It grants a complete salvation from the penalty (immediately), power (progressively), and presence (finally) of sin. What other message can do that?! Paul uses the word "salvation" with an eschatological nuance; it speaks of deliverance from judgment that is finalized only at the last day.

"I am obligated (v.14)"

“I am eager to preach (v.14)”

“I am not ashamed (v.16)”

“Believe” implies intellectual assent, but it is more than that. In Pauline literature, it means surrender to God as an act of the will (4:18, 10:9). Faith does not have moral value; it is not the cause of salvation. Faith receives a salvation from God in Christ.

2. The righteousness of God through it, v.17a

The “for” continues the chain of reasoning. “I am not ashamed.” Why (“for”)? It is the power of God displayed. Why (for)? Through it comes the righteousness of God through faith.

The “righteousness of God” is the key to salvation. It is not the righteousness of a person that saves; it is the righteousness that God gives that does. God gives people His righteousness. He clothes them with a new identity, through the merits of Christ’s appeasing death on the cross. The source of righteousness is God. Righteousness is the gift of God whereby He brings His people into right relationship with Himself.

The term, “righteousness of God,” can be a divine attribute or something that He bestows. Here it is the latter. “It is a God-righteousness,” says Murray. It is a righteousness that meets all the demands of a just God.

3. The scriptural proof of it, v.17b

Paul’s citation from the Old Testament shows that his message is not new. It is a text from Habakkuk (2:4) that is applied analogically. In the prophet’s day it was a call of faith for deliverance from the Babylonians based on Gen 15:6. Hundreds of years later Paul gives it its fullest and plainest application (cf. Gal 3: 11). Faith acquires God’s righteousness; righteousness is a gift, not a personal achievement!

Parenthesis: Paul’s use of the verb “to declare righteous” or “to justify” differs from equivalent Old Testament terms in three ways.

- *In the OT, the acquitting verdict of a judge was to be according to the facts. While God does not act unjustly in pronouncing our acquittal, it is against the fact of a person’s condition. Believers are not righteous; Christ’s righteousness has been declared to be theirs.*
- *In the OT, the verdict of acquittal awaits the final judgment. In Paul, it happens in the miracle of coming to Christ. The final verdict has been announced!*
- *Believers are more than acquitted of crimes innumerable; they are robed in the righteousness of their Redeemer.*