**Introduction to Romans**

**Hourglass Bible Study, Fall 2022**

Sources: Harper’s Bible Commentary, Asimov’s Guide to the Bible, Wikipedia, James Evans’ notes on Romans, Columbia College website,

**Overview**

Romans is the longest of the New Testament letters, which is probably why it comes first in the collection of letters in the New Testament. Scholars agree that this was genuinely written by Paul. It is the last of the letters we are sure are his. Possibly the last chapter was added later, however. It includes lots of names, and it is unlikely Paul would have known so many people in a church he had not visited.

Romans differs in situation from other letters in several ways. First, it is not written to a church Paul had created. Second, it does not seem to be written to respond to a particular problem occurring in the church. Third, it does not include information justifying Paul’s credentials as an apostle. It also includes broad themes, rather than focusing particularly on issues the Romans had. It also includes one theme not in the other letters: Israel’s relationship to the gospel.

Like other letters, though, it does refer to his calling to reach the Gentiles, yet uses Jewish traditions and arguments in its persuasion. It does address a church that includes both Gentiles and Jews, although Rome differed in that it was at the time a situation where the Gentiles had to accept and tolerate the Jews coming back to their congregation, rather than the reverse, which was true in eastern churches. It is the “most deliberate and reflective” of Paul’s letters(Harper’s).

Although the letters in the New Testament were not widely dispersed in the early years before 90 CE, after that they were and Romans was dispersed more widely than others. Letters that were dispersed this was were probably edited some to remove any passages that the conservative church was uncomfortable with (Harper’s).

It is viewed as Paul’s major work. Here are some quotes listed in Wikipedia. “In the opinion of [Jesuit](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Society_of_Jesus) biblical scholar [Joseph Fitzmyer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Fitzmyer), the book "overwhelms the reader by the density and sublimity of the topic with which it deals, the gospel of the justification and salvation of Jew and Greek alike by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ, revealing the uprightness and love of [God the Father](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/God_the_Father)."[]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistle_to_the_Romans#cite_note-FOOTNOTEFitzmyer1993xiii-4)

Anglican bishop [N. T. Wright](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N._T._Wright) notes that Romans is: . . .neither a systematic theology nor a summary of Paul's lifework, but it is by common consent his masterpiece. It dwarfs most of his other writings, . . . . What nobody doubts is that we are here dealing with a work of massive substance, presenting a formidable intellectual challenge while offering a breathtaking theological and spiritual vision.

**Date and circumstances**

Romans was likely written in 55-56 CE (Harpers and most sources) or 58 CE(Asimov), when Paul was getting ready for his third missionary journey and was hoping to visit Rome, gain support there, and go on to mission work in the west (such as Spain). Before he could start this trip, though, he had to go to Jerusalem to deliver funds he had collected to help the struggling followers of Jesus there. He may have been anxious about that visit to Jerusalem because he would again have to justify his position that Gentiles did not have to follow all the Jewish customs.

It was also within a year or two of the episode in Ephesus where Paul had to escape because the local silversmiths were angry because his mission work was reducing their work making “gods” for the local people. Aquilla and Priscilla helped him escape that situation.

Aquilla and Priscilla were originally from the church in Rome, but had been forced to leave when the emperor banned all Jews from Rome in 49 CE. Apparently there was infighting between Gentiles and Jews at this time. From Pas.rochester.edu: “An important event in the history of the Jews in Rome is mentioned by the Roman historian Suetonius. In his Life of Claudius, he says that Claudius ‘expelled the Jews from Rome because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus’ (25:2). Most scholars agree that ‘Chrestus’ is a corruption of the Greek Christos and that the reference is probably to disputes within the Jewish community over the claims of Jesus to be the Christos, the Messiah.” This ban on Jews was lifted in 56. Persecution of the Christians began again in 64 CE, after the Great Fire in Rome. Rome by 100 CE had about 20,000to 50,000 Jews in a population of about 1 million.

This letter is Paul’s introduction of himself to the Roman congregations; he hopes to win their trust and support for his mission to Spain. The person delivering the letter to the church in Rome was probably Phoebe, a woman from Cenchrea, a suburb of Corinth, so he likely wrote the letter in Corinth.

**Structure**

Paul uses the rhetorical structure of letters written at that time, but while addressing a congregation that has a similar view of the world since they are converts to a new religion living in a world that doesn’t understand them. (Asimov) In general at this time, a letter was viewed as a conversation at a distance, so that when the letter was read aloud it was like hearing Paul. The reader would likely have been the person who delivered the letter (there was no post office then!) because that person would have known the context in which Paul was writing and may have had more information that could be conveyed orally from Paul. We of course don’t have that context now.

The letter would have been written on a parchment scroll, a somewhat difficult situation for writing that usually called for the use of a professional scribe.

This letter was written in the diplomatic genre of rhetoric of the time. This form used formal proofs, each contained in ten paragraphs. There is a conclusion called a perovatio that includes a recap of the argument and an emotional appeal.

This letter, like letters of the time, was written to be read aloud to the congregation. It would have been read aloud in one sitting. There was no tradition of silent reading at this time, or of focusing only on a few portions of the overall text. It was structured like a classical rhetorical argument of the time. It includes a series of interlocking parts that are each proofs of a point he wants to make.

**Background on Paul**

Paul was born in Tarsus to a strict Jewish family. He received religious training from Gamaliel, who was on of the great rabbis or the period. He traveled a great deal, making three missionary trips to establish faith in Jesus in new areas.

Before Romans, he had likely written the letter to the Galatians, the letters to Thesalonians, and the letters to the Corinthians.