



## Paul's Epistle to the Romans

### Introduction

Romans is the first of the epistles to appear in the canon of the NT. This is not because of its superlative excellence, or that it is the longest, nor was it the first to be written but it is because of its significance and uniqueness as a theological treatise that makes it so important, that the early church fathers decreed it should be given this prominent status. The image shows Rome in relation to Corinth, where Paul had spent the winter of AD56/57 and wrote this letter (Acts 20:3). Pointers to this are that it commends Phoebe of Cenchreæ (Romans 16:1), lodged with Gaius (Romans 16:23), not the Gaius from Derbe (Acts 20:4), and he was going to Jerusalem with the offerings he collected in Achaia and Macedonia (Romans 15:26, Acts 24:17, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians Chapters 8-9).



The author of Romans is the apostle Paul; see the section 'Author'. Although a Roman citizen and being born in Tarsus, a Greek-speaking city in Cilicia, modern-day south eastern Turkey, Paul was a Jew, and he was a Jew first and foremost.

Despite being part of the Diaspora, Jews born and living outside of Judæa, he was proud of his Jewish heritage, identified himself with them as a people and continued to do so all his life.

His father was a Pharisee and Paul was trained

by the renowned Pharisaic teacher Gamaliel in Jerusalem as a young man. Pharisees were well-known for their strictness to adhering to learning and living by the OT scriptures, and Paul had a reputation among his peers as being particularly zealous for life as a Pharisaic Jew. In addition, he was clearly intelligent, apparently being schooled in Greek philosophy and poetry before moving to Jerusalem. However, according to Josephus, he had a less than stylised way of writing in Greek and was not a good orator in that language, but highly proficient nonetheless. His knowledge of the scriptures and other Hebraic writings popular at that time, e.g. Wisdom of Solomon, stood him in good stead in his debates and his letter writing.

His zeal and passion as a Jew led him to become fixated on the destruction of Christianity in its early days until his encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road. Although this would change his life forever, and he lived out his remaining days as zealous for Christ as he had been for the God of Israel, as known through his heritage and traditions, he remained as passionate about being a Jew and had a deep-rooted love for his nation that emerges frequently in this letter and many others. But he was now sent as an apostle to the Gentiles, a

commission given to him divinely by the Christ and he would use both his passion for this and his love of his heritage to great effect in this letter.

Paul did not see himself as a theologian as his passion was for evangelism by preaching the Gospel of Christ. His usual method on any of his journeys in any city was to take his message to the local Jews first and then to the Gentiles, especially where the Jews rejected his teaching.

What Paul had found through his encounter on the Damascus Road was that in accepting the Jew Jesus as the Messiah, Paul did not think in terms of moving into a new religion but of having found the final expression and intent of the Jewish tradition with which he himself had been born. He would not have conceived of himself as having ceased to be a Jew, or having inaugurated a new religion. In fact, he remained a Hebrew of Hebrews (Philippians 3:5).

In order to appreciate Paul's letter to Rome there are a couple of issues in his life that need to be briefly stated. Paul had won the dispute with the Jewish Christians and particularly with the mother-church in Jerusalem over the issue of circumcising Gentile converts, and this was ratified in the Jerusalem Council. Later, in Antioch, it appears Paul's relationship broke down with the other apostles, particularly Peter and Barnabas, which was over issues of the ceremonial law and in particular 'works of the law', where Paul was strongly persuaded to a greater freedom in Christ than others were. However, he wanted to maintain a good relationship between the Gentile churches and the Christian church in Jerusalem, which is why he personally wanted to present the offerings of the Gentile churches to the Jerusalem poor in what turned out to be his last recorded journey to Judæa.

His letter was written at the end of a phase in Paul's life that saw his relationship with those in Jerusalem strained and it reflects his hope and concern for the unity of the Christian movement, and this letter cannot help but reflect the concerns he felt that go beyond the issues in Rome, but which the churches in Rome were a microcosm of those same issues.

By the time Paul wrote his letter, Gentiles were probably the dominant group in the Christian churches that met mainly in house groups. Even those that had previously been associated with synagogues had probably distanced themselves from all aspects of the ceremonial law and this may have made it difficult for the Jews, who had only recently returned to Rome from expulsion by Claudius to conform to as they wanted to retain that part of their heritage. These were probably those that Paul would refer to as 'weak' and the Gentiles 'strong' in his argument for greater understanding between the two groups.

Another big political issue in Rome at that time was public taxation. Jews had been partially exempted from some Roman taxes on grounds that they paid the temple tax that was collected annually and sent to Jerusalem. This had been allowed under earlier emperors but was now an issue that could leave them open to charges of tax evasion. The weaker Christian churches would not want to become caught up in any such public debate and so Paul would offer advice on how they should respect civil government and pay the due taxes.

### Author

As the opening words of the letter clearly indicate, the apostle Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans. Only a few scholars in history have ever doubted his authorship, and their doubts have been shown to be groundless. The title of the book indicates that the letter was written to the Christian churches in Rome, somewhere Paul had never visited at the time of writing the letter, and as the content will show, it was his strong desire to see them.

### Date

Paul almost certainly wrote Romans from the vicinity of Corinth, on his third missionary journey, in AD56/57: <<He travelled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria,

he decided to go back through Macedonia>> (Acts 20:2-3), which shows he spent the three winter months in that region before retracing his steps to Macedonia. Having completed his work in the eastern part of the Roman Empire, Paul hoped to travel to Rome and then on to Spain; but first he needed to go to Jerusalem to deliver the offerings he had collected in Achaia, Macedonia and probably Asia, for the Jerusalem poor. This is described in Romans 15:19-32. It is also recorded in a brief statement by Paul in Acts 19:21 <<After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also" >>.

Evidence for Paul writing from Corinth comes when Paul commends Phoebe: <<I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchreæ. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me>> (Romans 16:1-2), and she was almost certainly the person who brought the letter to Rome. She resided in Cenchreæ, which was near Corinth and was its port city for the Aegean Sea. Furthermore, Gaius was Paul's host: <<Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings>> (Romans 16:23a), and this is likely the same Gaius who lived in Corinth: <<I am thankful that I did not baptise any of you except Crispus and Gaius>> (1 Corinthians 1:14). Finally, two fairly early manuscripts of Romans have subscriptions, i.e. brief notes that a copyist added at the end of a document, which say that the letter was written from Corinth.

### Theme

The theme of Romans is the revelation of God's judging and saving righteousness in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Cross of Christ, God judges sin, and yet at the same time, manifests his saving mercy.

### Purpose of Romans

Romans provides the fullest expression of Paul's theology, although it is doubtful that he intended it to be a complete summary statement. For example, Romans lacks any detailed treatment of Paul's doctrine of Christ, see Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20, of the church, see Ephesians, or of the end times, see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 and 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12.

It is more likely that Paul wrote this letter to address particular issues of concern to the Roman churches. Specifically, he addressed matters of interest for churches that included both Jewish and Gentile Christians:

1. Can one be right with God through obeying the law? (Romans 1:1-3:20).
2. What can be learned from Abraham, and is he the father of both Jewish and Gentile Christians? (Romans 4:1-25).
3. What role does the law play with reference to sin? (Romans 5:20 and 7:1-25).
4. What does the salvation of Gentiles indicate about the future of Israel as God's people? (Romans 9:1-11:36).
5. Should Christians observe OT food laws, and how should they relate to fellow believers on such matters. (Romans 14:1-15:13).

The focus on Jewish-Gentile issues suggests that tensions existed between Jews and Gentiles in the churches in Rome. The Roman churches probably began as Jewish churches, springing out of the 13 or so synagogues in the city at that time, although it is not known exactly when it was established. Perhaps Jews from Rome returned from Jerusalem after Pentecost (Acts 2:10) and founded the church, or perhaps the church was established later. Some have suggested that Peter founded the church in Rome, but no significant evidence supports this premise. It seems almost inconceivable that Paul would write such a lengthy and detailed letter to a church that had apostolic oversight, especially without reference to that apostle. This would be the case even if their personal relationship was now strained.

As time passed, of course, Gentiles in Rome also became Christians. The Roman historian Suetonius records that the Roman emperor Claudius, who reigned AD41-54, expelled Jews from Rome in AD49 because of strife over 'Chrestos'. Suetonius likely misunderstood the name, so that the dispute probably was about 'Christos', which is Latin for Christ. The expulsion of Jews from Rome is confirmed by Acts 18:2. As there was thought to be up to 60,000 Jews living in Rome at that time it seems unlikely they were all expelled, as this would damage the commercial life of the city, so it is more likely that just those directly involved in the disputes were expelled, which would include both synagogue and church leaders. Because of the expulsion, the Gentile churches would have developed for a number of years apart from the Jews. Over the years the Jewish Christians slowly filtered back into Roman churches. It is not difficult to imagine that tensions would develop between law-observing Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, who lived free of the restrictions of the Mosaic law. It seems, however, that the churches were made up mainly of Gentile Christians. See Romans 1:5-6, 1:13, 11:13 and 15:15-16.

Paul's selection of themes: Gospel and law; the significance of Abraham; and the future of Israel; suggests significant tensions between the Jews and Gentiles in Rome. Paul wrote Romans so that they would be united in the Gospel he preached, and so that they would comprehend how the Gospel spoke about the issues that divided them.

A closer look at Romans reveals another purpose as well. Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to rally around his Gospel so that Rome would become the base of operations by which he could proclaim the Gospel in Spain (Romans 15:22-24). If Roman Christians did not agree with Paul's Gospel message, especially on the issues being debated among Jews and Gentiles, then they would not support his proposed mission to Spain. Paul needed to explain the Gospel in some detail so that the Christians in Rome would become the base from which he could proclaim the Gospel in new regions.

In summary, Paul's main purposes were probably:

- Pastoral - he wanted unity in the churches and those who were liberated to be accepting of those who felt a need for obedience to the law, and tolerance from the latter group toward the former. It seems that he wanted to heal any rifts that existed both between and within local house churches, especially wishing to make Gentile churches accepting of individual Jewish converts who wanted to follow the ceremonial law.
- Apologetic - the main theme of Paul's letter is the Gospel and he wanted them to have a clear understanding of what the Gospel meant in terms of the way the ordinary Christian should live their life, and how they should then promote the Gospel to others.
- Mission - Paul had completed his work in the north-eastern quadrant of the Mediterranean Sea area and now wanted to work in the north-western area. In the former he had set up operational bases in Corinth and Ephesus, and now Rome seemed a good place to centre his new mission to Spain.

Of course, the ultimate aim and purpose for the preaching of the Gospel is the glory of God. Paul longs for the Gentiles to come to the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name (Romans 1:5). God has planned all of salvation history to bring glory and praise to his name (Romans 11:33-36).

### Summary of Salvation History

God's OT promises of salvation are fulfilled in the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and of new life received through faith in him. The Gospel goes to both Jew and Gentile, fulfilling God's plan to bless the nations (Genesis 12:3).

It is a mistake to think that the Jews of this period thought that salvation was earned through the works of the law for they had always recognised that the gift God had given by choosing

them as a nation to start with was a gift of free grace, consummated in the covenant promises he made. The law was then given as a way of living within the structure of the covenant promises and not as a way of earning merit into salvation, as that was promised, through God's grace at the outset.

Therefore, there is no contradiction in this letter in Paul's dealings with the law either from his Pharisaic background or his new life as a Christian under grace and not under law.

### Writing Style

Romans contains all of the standard features of a biblical epistle, including the salutation, thanksgiving, body, parænesis, i.e. a list of moral exhortations, personal greetings, and benediction. What distinguishes the letter is its long and carefully constructed body, which presents a sustained theological argument. Romans is perhaps the most tightly organised of all the NT letters, which helps explain why it reads so much like a theological treatise as it does a letter. Understanding Romans thus demands careful attention to the details of its doctrine.

As a theological treatise, the book of Romans is a grand edifice. It is filled with lofty theological ideas and vocabulary. The rhetoric is often grand, taking such forms as elaborate sentence construction or language syntax, and patterns of verbal repetition. What is often overlooked is that there is a continuous presence of a genre that tends toward the informal and that even lends a colloquial vigour that balances its grandeur. This genre, known as the diatribe, was used extensively by Roman teachers and orators, also known as preachers. The traits of the form included the following: dialogue with hypothetical questioners or opponents; as part of that, question-and-answer constructions, sometimes catechism-like in effect; use of questions or hypothetical objections as a transition to the next topic; rhetorical questions; adducing famous and representative figures from the past as examples; use of analogy as a rhetorical device; and aphoristic style.

The book is unified primarily by the coherence of its central argument, which outlines and explains the eternal plan of God for the salvation of sinners. The book's thesis statement, see Romans 1:16-17, alerts the reader of the central place that the righteousness of God occupies in this plan; the righteousness that God both demands in obedience and offers as a free gift in Christ, that is received only by faith.

There has been significant debate as to whether Chapter 16 was part of the original letter or part of another letter directed to the Ephesian church. It is now accepted by the majority to have been part of the original letter, but experts in Paul's writing would have no trouble in accepting that letters could be circulated with the same, slightly modified introductions and conclusions, with only the body of the letter being changed. It may therefore be the case that where manuscripts that contain only what we now have as Chapter 16 do arise, they were actually part of a different letter to the one sent to Rome. Some of the manuscripts also include the fact that the letter was written in Corinth and this indicates that several copies of the letter may have been written in Corinth and taken to Rome by Phoebe to ease circulation to the many church groups that met in Rome at that time.

There has been further debate as to whether the letter to the Romans was originally one or two letters by Paul; Chapters 5-8 being a second letter from the rest. However, this is largely disputed and most show that Chapters 1-11 hold together coherently as theological exposition and Chapters 12-15 as an ideological foundation or practical application of the foregoing chapters. Chapter 16 is then the standard salutary conclusion. In the event, the exposition transcends the immediacy of its several purposes and provides a coherent and integrated vision of the eschatological people of God, Gentile and Jew, which is of lasting value.

## Key Themes

<u>Theme</u>	<u>Verses</u>
1 All people are sinners, therefore all, without exception, need to be saved from their sin.	1:18-3:20; 5:12-19.
2 The Mosaic law, although perfect and holy, cannot counteract the power of sin.	2:12-29; 3:9-20; 5:20; 7:1-25; 9:30-10:8.
3 Through the righteousness of God, sin is judged and salvation is provided.	3:21-26; 5:12-19; 6:1-10; 7:1-6; 8:1-4.
4 With the coming of Jesus Christ, the former age of redemptive history has passed away and the new age of redemptive history has begun.	1:1-7; 3:21-26; 5:1-8:39.
5 The atoning death of Jesus Christ is central to God's plan of salvation.	3:21-26; 4:23-25; 5:6-11, 15-19; 6:1-10; 7:4-6; 8:1-4.
6 Justification is by faith alone.	1:16-4:25; 9:30-10:21.
7 There is a certain hope of future glory for those who are in Christ Jesus.	5:1-8:39.
8 Those who have died with Christ and who enjoy the work of the Holy Spirit are enabled to live a new life.	2:25-29; 6:1-7:6; 8:1-39.
9 God is sovereign in salvation; he works all things according to his plan.	9:1-11:36.
10 God fulfils his saving promises to both Jews and Gentiles.	1:18-4:25; 9:1-11:36; 15:8-13.
11 The grace of the Gospel calls Christians to personal holiness, mutual service, good citizenship, and wholehearted brotherly-love in Christ.	12:1-13:14.

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## The Setting of Romans

Paul almost certainly wrote Romans from Corinth during his over-winter, three month stay (AD56/57) as part of his third missionary journey (Acts 20:2-3). Rome was the epicentre of the powerful Roman Empire, ruling over many of the great ancient centres of Western civilization. Paul had established the church at Corinth during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-11).

The churches in Rome had probably been set up initially by Roman Jews, perhaps after some of them had come to faith at the initial outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. In AD49, Jews were expelled from Rome by edict of the Emperor Claudius, and the Gentiles thus dominated the churches and probably continued to do so after the Jews were allowed to return. It is clear from Paul's deep-rooted use of OT scriptures in his letter that these Gentiles had a good knowledge of these scriptures and thus they were probably God-fearers who were originally attached to a synagogue and were attracted to Judaism but had not become proselytes. It is known that Judaism was widely respected and found attractive to many Gentiles in Rome during the years leading up to Christianity reaching the city.

It seems there were one hundred or so Christians in Rome, many of them slaves or freedmen, and the majority were probably from poorer backgrounds. They met mainly in house groups and did not appear to constitute a church even in Paul's eyes due to their fragmentation. In Chapter 16, Paul specifically refers to five house churches and records a house group with his friends Priscilla and Aquila, and the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus may also have been a house church. Meeting as a larger gathering may have been too dangerous at that time.

Paul's letter seems mainly to be addressed to the Gentiles in the churches and clearly reflects his knowledge of ethnic tensions in these churches. It is to ease these tensions and with the hope of establishing churches where both Jew and Gentile can come together in unity to worship Christ that Paul sets out this letter.

## Outline

- I. The Gospel as the revelation of the righteousness of God (1:1-17)
  - a. Salutation: the Gospel concerning God's Son (1:1-7)
  - b. Paul's longing to visit Rome (1:8-17)
- II. God's righteousness in His wrath against sinners (1:18-3:20)
  - a. God's wrath against mankind (1:18-32)
  - b. The unrighteousness of the Jews (2:1-3:8)
    - i. God's righteous judgment (2:1-16)
    - ii. The Jews and the Law (2:17-29)
    - iii. God's faithfulness (3:1-8)
  - c. No one is righteous (3:9-20)
- III. The saving righteousness of God (3:21-4:25)
  - a. Righteousness through faith (3:21-31)
    - i. God's righteousness in the death of Jesus (3:21-26)
    - ii. Righteousness by faith for Jews and Gentiles (3:27-31)
  - b. Abraham justified by faith (4:1-25)
- IV. Hope as a result of righteousness by faith (5:1-8:39)
  - a. Peace and joy (5:1-11)
  - b. Death through Adam, life through Christ (5:12-21)
  - c. The triumph of grace over the power of sin (6:1-23)
    - i. Dead to sin, alive in Christ (6:1-14)
    - ii. Slaves to righteousness (6:15-23)
  - d. An illustration from marriage (7:1-6)
  - e. Struggling with sin (7:7-25)
  - f. Life through the spirit (8:1-17)
  - g. Assurance of hope (8:18-39)
    - i. Future glory (8:18-27)
    - ii. More than conquerors (8:28-39)

- V. God's righteousness to Israel and to the Gentiles (9:1-11:36)
  - a. God's sovereign choice (9:1-29)
  - b. Israel's rejection of God's saving promises (9:30-11:10)
    - i. Israel's unbelief (9:30-10:21)
    - ii. The remnant of Israel (11:1-10)
  - c. God's righteousness in his plan for Jews and Gentiles (11:11-32)
    - i. Ingrafted branches (11:11-24)
    - ii. All Israel will be saved (11:25-32)
  - d. Doxology (11:33-36)
- VI. God's righteousness in everyday life (12:1-15:13)
  - a. Marks of the Christian community (12:1-13:14)
    - i. Living sacrifices (12:1-8)
    - ii. Love (12:9-21)
    - iii. Submission to the authorities (13:1-7)
    - iv. Love, for the Day Is near (13:8-14)
  - b. The weak and the strong (14:1-15:13)
- VII. The extension of God's righteousness through the Pauline mission (15:14-16:23)
  - a. The establishment of churches among the Gentiles (15:14-33)
    - i. Paul the minister to the Gentiles (15:14-22)
    - ii. Paul's plan to visit Rome (15:23-33)
  - b. Personal greetings (16:1-27)
    - i. Appreciation and greetings to co-workers in the Gospel (16:1-23)
    - ii. Final summary of the Gospel of the righteousness of God (16:25-27)