

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Romans

March 11, 2012

It is commonly agreed that the Epistle to the Romans is one of the greatest Christian writings. The Reformation may be regarded as the unleashing of new spiritual life as a result of a renewed understanding of the teaching of Romans. The 13 Pauline letters average around 1,300 words. Romans is Paul's longest letter, with about 7,100 words. Its length as well as the profundity of its subject matter marks it out as a most unusual letter.

Romans Theme: Justification by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Outline:

1:16-17	Thesis
1:18-3:20	Human sinfulness
3:21-5:21	Grace thru Christ
Chapter 4	Even Abraham was saved by faith (not store of merit)
Chapter 5	Results of our salvation: peace with God
Chapters 6-8	Holy Christian living Died to sin Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?
Chapters 9-11	The problem of Israel's unbelief
Chapters 12-14	Practical commands for Christian living; e.g. obey civil authority
Chapters 15-16	Travel plans and greetings

Authorship. The letter claims to have been written by the apostle Paul (1:1), and no serious objection appears ever to have been urged against this claim.

Destination. As it stands, the letter is addressed to the church at Rome (1:7, 15). This is supported by the geographical note in which Paul writes of going to Spain and proceeds, "I hope to visit you while passing through" (15:24).

We have no precise information about how and when and by whom the church was established at Rome. Acts 2:10 informs us that visitors from Rome were among those in Jerusalem who heard the Christians preach on the day of Pentecost. There is a tradition that Peter and Paul founded the church. But this epistle shows that the church was flourishing in Rome long before Paul visited that city. When Paul wrote this

epistle, he had never been to Rome (1:10-13), and he makes it clear that there was already a significant group of believers there (1:6, 7, 8; 15:14).

There is no reliable tradition about the founding of this church, and we are left to speculation. The probability is that traders and other travelers first brought Christianity to Rome. It seems likely that the first converts were won from among the Jews, and they may have even been organized as a synagogue. This is speculation, but it is supported by a note in the Roman historian Suetonius. This man tells us that the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome because they “constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus (*impulsore Chresto*).” Most scholars take “Chrestus” as equivalent to “Christus,” that is, Christ. The fairly large group of Jews in Rome had mixed feelings about Christianity. Some followed Christ. But others objected so violently that there were riots.

But if the first converts were Jews, this was a condition that did not last. By the time Romans was written, a large Gentile element was clearly in the number (1:5-6, 13; 11:13-32; cf. 9:3ff.; 10:1-2; 15:15-16).

Date and Place of Writing. The epistle seems to have been written in Corinth. Paul commends Phoebe, a lady from Cenchraea, the port of that city (16:1). His host is Gaius (16:23), and Gaius is the name of a man Paul baptized at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14). Erastus, Timothy, and Sopater were with Paul when Romans was written (16:21, 23) and also when he was in Greece (Acts 19:22; 20:2-4). Both times Paul intended to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:21; Romans 15:24-26, 28). The object of his immediate journey was to take money to the poor saints at Jerusalem (Acts 24:17; Romans 15:26-28). All this makes it conclusive that Paul was writing from Corinth just before he traveled to Jerusalem.

The fixed point for Pauline chronology is the proconsulship of Gallio in Corinth, for there is an inscription that tells us that this man was in office in A.D. 52. Proconsuls held office for a year, though on occasion their terms might be extended to two years. Paul would have been in Corinth at some time during the period A.D. 50-54. We do not know at exactly what point Paul was brought before him (Acts 18:12). But it is not unreasonable to suppose that it was early in his term of office (the Jews might hope to get their wish granted by a new official) and not so very long before the end of Paul's own ministry in that city. Some date Romans as early as A.D. 53. But A.D. 55 seems to satisfy the data as well as any year.

Occasion. What emerges is that Paul had never been to Rome, though for a long time he had wanted to visit the Christians there (1:8-13; 15:23). He says that he had been hindered from coming to Rome (1:13; 15:22), which seems to mean that he had tried to

come but had been stopped. When he wrote, however, he had the prospect of a trip to Spain (15:22-29), which would give him the opportunity to visit the Roman Christians along the way.

A Dialogue with Judaism. Paul is concerned in this letter to respond to questions Jews might ask, such as “What is Israel’s role in salvation-history” and “What is the function of the Torah and circumcision?” Romans is a dialogue with Judaism.

Preparation for a Visit. When Paul wrote, he had the prospect of a trip to Spain. He saw this as a good opportunity to visit Rome. When he headed west, it was unthinkable that he would pass by this great church which he had so greatly longed to see. The epistle must be seen, then, as a means of preparing the way for a visit. Paul wanted to exercise a ministry in Rome (1:11-15). This was to be more than a halt by the way as he enlisted support for his mission to Spain. He wanted the support of the Roman Christians in his further missionary work as he had had that of the church of Antioch in the preceding period.

Paul had been a missionary for 20 years or so. With the completion of his mission to the East (15:19) an important chapter of his life had closed. It is not unreasonable to suppose that, with this work done and with a mission field in Spain before his mind’s eye, Paul hoped to transfer his base from Antioch to Rome.

Contents. Romans is not greatly taken up with local issues (as is, e.g., 1 Corinthians). It is true that Paul is apparently not unmindful of certain happenings at Rome. Paul knows of the faith of the Roman Christians (1:8) and of their obedience (16:19). He speaks of the “strong” and the “weak” in such a way as to lead to the conclusion that both groups were represented at Rome (14:1-15:13). It may be significant that Paul nowhere indicates that he had had communications from the church at Rome as he had had, for example, from the Corinthians (they had written to him, 1 Corinthians 7:1; Chloe’s people had given Paul news, 1 Corinthians 1:11; and Stephanas and others had come from Corinth, 1 Corinthians 16:17; there is no equivalent in Romans).

The letter is not to be understood apart from Paul’s own experience. He had been brought up an orthodox Jew, a loyal Pharisee, fanatical to the point of persecuting the Christians. But on the Damascus road he had come face to face with the risen Christ. This encounter revolutionized his entire way of thinking and living. He saw now that God had been active in Christ and that it was through the cross that he had brought salvation to mankind. Grace, not law, was decisive. Romans puts great stress on the divine initiative and on the centrality of grace. Paul is not taking his own experience as normative. An important section of the epistle is taken up with God’s dealings with

Abraham, and another with his activities with his own people Israel. But while God might deal with people in different ways, he has always acted by the way of grace.

Paul states briefly the thesis of his letter, stressing the power of God manifest in the gospel and the importance of faith (1:16-17). Then he proceeds to a massive argument in which he shows that all people, Gentiles and Jews alike, are sinners and in danger of the judgment of God (1:18-3:20).

One point that is often overlooked and should be stressed is that Romans is fundamentally a book about God. The thought of God dominates this epistle. The word "God" occurs 153 times in Romans, an average of once every 46 words. Acts has the word 166 times, but since it is so much longer this works out to once in 110 words. Next is "law" (72 times), then "Christ" (65), "sin" (48), "Lord" (43), and "faith" (40).