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Letter to the Romans

Longer than any other NT letter, more reflective in its outlook than any other undisputed Pauline writing, Rom has been the most studied of the apostle's writings—indisputably Paul's theological chef d'oeuvre. This letter has played a major role in the development of theology and is the most important of Paul's letters.

THE BACKGROUND

There are two important introductory issues: the situation in Paul's life that served as the context of the letter, and the history of the Roman community that received it. The first is relatively easy to discern. Items in Rom 16:1–2, 23 (Phoebe, Cenchreae, Gaius) indicate that Paul wrote to Rome from Corinth (57/58), whence he was about to take a collection to Jerusalem (15:26–33).

The second issue involves the recipients of the letter, a debated matter. Some insist Paul knew little about the Roman church. But if (another debated matter) chap. 16 belongs to Rom and Paul knew and

SUMMARY OF BASIC INFORMATION

DATE: In the winter of 57/58 from Corinth (55/56 in the Revisionist Chronology).

TO: God's beloved in Rome, where Paul had never been but had friends.

AUTHENTICITY: Not seriously disputed.

UNITY: A very small minority posits the joining of two separate letters; a larger minority maintains that chap. 16 was added later.

INTEGRITY: Besides chap. 16 (or the doxology in 16:25–27), a few have rejected chap. 9–11 as not truly Pauline.

FORMAL DIVISION:

A. Opening Formula: 1:1–7

B. Thanksgiving: 1:8–10

C. Body: 1:11–15:13

D. Concluding Formulas (15:14–16:23) plus Doxology (16:25–27).

DIVISION ACCORDING TO CONTENTS:

1:1–15: Address/greeting, Thanksgiving, and Proem about Paul's wish to come to Rome

1:16–11:36: Doctrinal Section:

Part I: 1:16–4:25: Uprightness of God revealed through the gospel

1:18–3:20: God's wrath and the sins of Gentiles and Jews

3:21–4:25: Justification by faith apart from the Law

Part II: 5:1–8:39: God's salvation for those justified by faith

Part III: 9:1–11:36: God's promises to Israel

12:1–15:13 Hortatory Section:

Part I: 12:1–13:14: Authoritative advice for Christian living

Part II: 14:1–15:13: The strong owe love to the weak

15:14–33: Paul's travel plans and a blessing

16:1–23: Recommendation for Phoebe and greetings to people at Rome

16:25–27: Concluding doxology

greeted twenty-six people in Rome, presumably he knew something about the Roman church.

Accordingly, Paul's letter in 57/58 implies the Christian community had been in existence for a considerable period of time, since he had been wishing "for many years" to visit (15:23). Thus it seems that the Roman Christian community must have existed by the early 50s. Indeed, Suetonius (*Claudius* 25.4) states that Claudius "expelled Jews from Rome because of their constant disturbances impelled by Chrestus [*impulsore Chresto*]," which many scholars believe is a garbled remembrance of "Christ." Strikingly, Acts 18:1–3 reports that when Paul came to Corinth (ca. 50) he found lodging with Aquila and Priscilla,

a Jewish couple who had recently come from Italy “because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome.” Apparently they came from Rome as Jews who already believed in Jesus. This expulsion may have meant that by AD 49 the Christian mission had been in Rome long enough to cause serious friction in the synagogues. If so, very likely Christianity had reached Rome by the early 40s.

GENERAL ANALYSIS OF THE MESSAGE

THE OPENING FORMULA (1:1–7), THE THANKSGIVING (1:8–10), and a PROEM (1:11–15) that serves as Body-Opening may be treated together. While Paul did not use the expression “the church of God that is in Rome” or “the churches of Rome” to address the Roman community he could scarcely call a group that he did not consider a church “the beloved of God in Rome called to be holy” (Rom 1:7). (He also did not use “church” at the beginning of Phil.)

In the salutation Paul uses only his own name—no co-sender—and states that he is “an apostle set apart for the gospel of God” (1:1), which is “The gospel concerning God’s Son who was born/begotten of the seed of David according to the flesh, designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead” (1:3–4). Critical scholarship recognizes that here Paul is not using language of his own coinage but offering a Jewish Christian formulation of the gospel—presumably because such a formulation would be known to the Roman Christians and acceptable to them. What he preaches agrees with the preaching of those who evangelized the Romans. Thus, he and the Romans can be encouraged by each other’s faith (1:12). In the transition to the Body of the letter (1:10–15) Paul relates his future plan to come to Rome.

DOCTRINAL SECTION OF THE BODY: PART I (1:16–4:25): *The uprightness/righteousness [dikaiosynē] of God revealed through the gospel.* Paul continues into the main section of his letter by stressing that the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe, first for the Jew, then for the Greek. (Notice the theological sequence, which would be effective against any who claimed that Paul devalued Jewish believers.) A central theme of Rom is that “the righteousness of God” is now revealed, namely, a manifestation of that quality whereby in judgment

God acquits people of their sins through faith. What was the relation of people to God before the coming of the gospel of Christ? Turning first to the Gentiles (1:18–23), Paul wishes to explain that a gracious God was knowable from the time of creation. In terms of Jewish standard values, in the pagan world the divine image was obscured through idolatry, which was expressed in lust and depraved conduct. Then, in 2:1 Paul speaks to an imagined Jewish listener, who might be passing judgment on what Paul has condemned and yet, despite this superior stance, be doing the same things. God does not show favoritism: Jews will be judged according to the Law; then, Gentiles will be judged according to nature and what is written in their hearts and consciences (2:5–16).

In a remarkable section (2:17–24) Paul taunts the proud claims of Jewish superiority. All human beings are guilty before God. Well, then, what is the advantage of circumcised Jews? Paul answers: To the Jews were given God's own words of promise, and God is faithful. Through faith of/in Jesus Christ, the righteousness of God justifies without distinction Jew and Greek. God's integrity is vindicated: God is not unfair, for the sins of all have been expiated by Christ's blood. No one has the right to boast, since God has graciously justified the circumcised and the uncircumcised in the same way, by faith apart from deeds/works of the Law (3:27–31).

In chap. 4 Paul reaches back to the first book of the Law and cites Abraham to show that God has worked consistently, for Abraham's righteousness came by faith, not by the Law (Gen 12, 15, 17). The Jews of Paul's time would have looked to Abraham as their forebear, but for Paul he is "father of us all" who share his faith (4:16). The story of the righteousness attributed to Abraham was written for those who believe in the One who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, "who was given over for our transgressions and raised for our justification" (4:25).

DOCTRINAL SECTION OF THE BODY: PART II (5:1–8:39): *Reconciliation to God in Christ and Its Benefits*. If people are justified by faith and have peace with God through Christ, they also experience God's grace. This brings many benefits: peace with God, hope of sharing God's glory, and an outpouring of God's love (5:1–5). The description of how Christ's death accomplished justification, salvation, and reconciliation (5:6–11) con-

tains one of the great NT explanations of what is involved in divine love: a willingness to die for sinners who do not deserve such graciousness. Paul now compares what has been accomplished through Christ with the state of all human beings stemming from Adam: grace and life compared to sin and death. As Adam led to condemnation for all, so Christ led to justification and life for all. This passage (5:12–21) gave rise to the theology of original sin.

In 6:1–11 Paul introduces baptism. Our old self was crucified with Christ; we were baptized into his death, a death to sin, and buried with him, so that as he was raised from the dead we too might walk in newness of life. But Sin (personified by Paul) remains an active force, and 6:12–23 warns against being enslaved by Sin.

In chap. 7, Paul returns to the issue of the Mosaic Law. The basic principle is that Christ's death has annulled the binding power of the Law. The "I" monologue that runs through 7:7–25 is among the most dramatic of Paul's rhetorical passages in Rom: "I do not understand what I do. I do not do what I wish, but I do the very thing I hate . . ." This impassioned speech has had many interpretations, but a parallel from DSS (1QS 11:9–15) confirms that Paul is *describing sinful humanity* from a Jewish viewpoint, and for Paul deliverance comes from a gracious God through faith in Jesus Christ. Here in part is this text from the DSS document referred to as The Community Rule:

As for me, I belong to wicked humanity, to the assembly of unjust flesh. My iniquities, transgressions, and sins, together with the wickedness of my heart, belong to the assembly of worms and of those walking in darkness. No human being has a course or determines his own steps, for judgment is with God alone. . . . As for me, if I stumble, the grace of God is my eternal salvation. If I fall because of the sin of the flesh, my judgment shall be according to the righteousness of God that remains forever.

How is our new life to be lived? In chap. 8 Paul's answer is that we are to live not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit of God, who raised Christ from the dead. We become children of God, heirs of God and co-heirs of Christ in a relationship with God through the Spirit of him who was uniquely God's Son. Moreover, the earth

was cursed because of Adam's sin (Gen 3:17–19; 5:29). As part of his contrast between Adam and Christ, Paul (Rom 8:18–23) speaks also of Christ's healing effect on all material creation. As we hope and wait with endurance, the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs that cannot be spoken (8:24–27). Both justification and glorification are part of the purpose of God predestined from the beginning (8:28–30). In 8:31–39 Paul ends this section of Rom with one of the most eloquent statements in all Christian writing: "If God is for us, who is against us? . . . I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor present things nor future, nor any powers . . . will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

DOCTRINAL SECTION OF THE BODY: PART III (9:1–11:36): How is one to understand God's dealings with Israel concerning belief/unbelief in the Christ? How is it that the Israelites (Jews), who received the promises through the Law and the Prophets, rejected Christ? How does God's purpose of election continue? Paul writes chapters so surprising that some scholars (beginning already in the second century with Marcion, who rejected the God of the OT as an inferior deity and not the Heavenly Father of Jesus Christ) have deemed them to be foreign to the letter and contradictory. Paul would be willing to be cut off from Christ and be damned for the sake of his Jewish kinsmen! Giving the lie to all who say that he denigrates Judaism, he lists with pride the marvelous Israelite privileges (9:4–5).

Paul explains that the word of God has not failed. God cannot be asked to account for the choices made. Israel failed because it sought righteousness by deeds, not by faith; and to compound the error, despite its zeal, it has not recognized that God has manifested righteousness to those who believe in Christ and that, in fact, Christ is the end of the Law (9:30–10:4). "If you profess with your lips that 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10:9). In this "you" (singular) there is no distinction between Jew and Greek (10:12).

In 10:14–21 Paul offers Israel little excuse. "Has God then rejected His people?" (11:1). In an indignant negative response to the question rhetorically posed, Paul speaks as an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, who has been chosen by grace. He cites an example from Israel's history where the majority failed, but God preserved a remnant

(11:2–10). In fact, Paul foresees that everything will work out well (11:11–32). Israel's stumbling and partial hardening of heart have been providential in allowing salvation to come to the Gentiles. Then because of the Gentile experience of salvation Israel will become jealous, and all Israel will be saved. Gentile believers should not boast; they earlier and Israel now have been disobedient, and God is showing mercy to all.

HORTATORY SECTION OF THE BODY: PART I (12:1–13:14): *Authoritative advice for Christian Living.* Beginning in 12:3, Paul echoes ideas that he also expressed in I Cor: one body, many members, different gifts/charisms, among which are prophecy and teaching, and an emphasis on love.

The directive to be subject to governing authorities (13:1–7) is particularly appropriate in a letter to the capital. Paul's admonition is theologically based, not merely practical. Strikingly, in 13:8–10 Paul is in harmony with the Jesus tradition, writing, "The one who loves the other has fulfilled the Law" and, then, contending that the commandments are summed up in "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18).

HORTATORY SECTION OF THE BODY: PART II (14:1–15:13): *The strong owe love to the weak.* We are not certain of the origin of the language of "strong" and "weak" that appears here. The "strong" are convinced they can eat anything and need not treat any days as special; the "weak" are cautious about eating and observe certain holy days. The issue probably reflects observances stemming from the purity and cultic demands of the Mosaic Law. The "strong" regard those demands as irrelevant, the "weak" ("weak in faith"; 14:1) think they are obligatory. The matter, however, is not simply Gentile vs. Jew, with Gentile indicating "the strong" and Jew indicating "the weak." Any controversy being indicated is about religious practices, not ethnicity (or race). Both groups would have included Jews and Gentiles.

Paul is concerned that the two groups should not judge or despise each other (14:3–4, 10, 13). If the Roman Christians, "strong" or "weak," have heard that Paul does not oblige his Gentile Christian converts to observe the Mosaic Law, then, they are learning that he would never countenance that this freedom be used to divide a community. Identifying himself with the "strong," Paul warns them that it is better not to eat meat or drink wine if it causes the brother or sister to trip or stumble (14:21). Christ did not please himself (15:3) but became

a servant of the circumcision to show God's fidelity, confirming the promises made to the patriarchs, so that the Gentiles may glorify God's mercy (15:8–9a).

FIRST CONCLUDING SECTION (15:14–33): *Paul's future plans.* Paul explains his dealings with the Romans. His preaching the gospel is a liturgical service so that the Gentiles might become an acceptable sacrifice to God (15:16). In executing that service Paul has gone from Jerusalem to Illyricum (western Greece). Now he hopes to push farther west, through Rome, whose Christians he has desired for many years to visit, to preach the gospel where Christ has not been named, namely, Spain (15:14–24). But first he must bring to the Jerusalem poor the money he has collected, and that journey worries him. Paul wants the Romans to help him on his journey by praying for him (15:25–33).

SECOND CONCLUDING SECTION (16:1–27): *Greetings to Roman friends.* First, Phoebe, a woman deacon of the church at Cenchreae a few miles from where Paul is writing and a great help to him, is going to Rome (perhaps carrying this letter); she should be received well. Second, there are various people already in Rome who know Paul, and he proceeds to greet twenty-six of them in 16:3–16. Paul's references to groups suggest that the Roman community consisted of a number of small house-churches. (Among those greeted by Paul are "Andronicus and Junia/Junias," who are "outstanding among the apostles" [16:7]. Inscriptions indicate that Junia/Junias is most likely a woman's name [Junia]. This identity would mean that Paul could apply the term "apostle" to a woman.)

The letter ends (16:21–23) with Paul including greetings from other Christians in Corinth. The doxology in 16:25–27 is missing from many mss. and may well be an early copyist's or editor's liturgical addition for public reading in church.

JUSTIFICATION/UPRIGHTNESS/RIGHTEOUSNESS/JUSTICE

This key idea in Pauline thought and in Rom is expressed in a number of terms: the verb *dikaion*; the nouns *dikaiosynē*, *dikaiōsis*; and the adjective *dikaios*. The noun *dikaiosynē* can be translated in English as "righteousness" or "justification," depending on the context. Paul speaks of the "righteousness of God" (*dikaiosynē theou*), but how is the genitive

to be interpreted? In times past it has been understood as a possessive genitive, an attribute of God's being, a divine virtue, almost equivalent to "the righteous God." Today, two other understandings have major support. The phrase can be taken as a possessive genitive, describing an active attribute of God, the justifying activity of God—for example, Rom 3:25–26, which speaks of God's forbearance "as proof of God's righteousness at the present time: that He Himself is righteous and justifies the person who has faith in Jesus." Or, the phrase can be understood as a genitive of source or origin, describing the state of uprightness communicated to human beings as a gift from or by God—for example, Phil 3:9: "not having my own righteousness which is from the Law but that which is through the faith of/in Christ, the righteousness from [ek] God that depends on faith."

There is a legal background in the root of the word, as if people were being brought before God for judgment and God is acquitting them and thus manifesting divine graciousness. In this just and merciful divine judgment there is also a sense of God asserting authority and power, triumphing over the forces that would mislead people, setting things right, and saving the world. Although such a notion of the righteousness of God, often in other terminology, was a reality for OT Israel, for Paul there was in Jesus a greater, eschatological manifestation of God's *dikaïosynē*, extended to all.

"Justification" is also used by Paul to describe an effect worked in those who believe what God has done in Christ. Since God acquitted people in judgment, they were now justified. This acquitting took place not because people were innocent but because, although they were sinners, the truly innocent Jesus was himself made sin for the sake of others (II Cor 5:21). For Paul this justification or righteousness took the place of the righteousness under the Law (Phil 3:6) and was a grace or gift received through faith (Rom 3:24–25). A major scholarly debate is centered on whether for Paul God simply declares people upright by a type of judicial sentence (forensic or declarative justification) or actually changes people and makes them upright (causative or factitive justification). Yet, is a sharp distinction possible since God's justifying declaration has an element of power that is also causative? Can people be *reconciled* without being transformed?