

The Distinctiveness of Romans

In Romans 9-11 Paul deals with the theme of Israel in relation to the failure of the Jewish people as a whole to respond positively to the gospel; this is the only place for Paul to do so in his letters.

'To the Jew first' occurs three times only in Romans (1:16 and 2:9-10). What is strange is that this emphasis on the privileges of Israel appears in the same letter as a strong emphasis on divine impartiality (2:11).

In Romans 4 the seed of Abraham is described as comprising two peoples, whereas in Galatians the seed is singular referring only to Christ.

The olive tree analogy in Romans 11:17-24 is unique to this letter.

Christ is described in Romans 15:8-9 as the servant of the circumcised, who came to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs and so that Gentiles might glorify God.

The long list of greetings in Romans 16 is unique. Twenty-five people are listed, some women and some Jewish Christians.

Another unique factor in the situation that Paul addresses in Romans may be that he is speaking to Gentile Christians who are still attached to the synagogues.

The Situation in Rome

There are a number of indications in the letter regarding the situation among the Christ-believers in Rome. In Romans 16:3-4 Prisca and Aquila (also mentioned in I Corinthians 16:19 and Acts 18:1-3) are apparently back in Rome, presumably after Nero's accession to power in 54 CE. Thus Claudius's decree (49 CE), which led to the expulsion of significant numbers of Jews, seems to have been revoked. [They had constantly been responsible for disturbances at the instigation of *Chrestos*, according to Suetonius, 2nd century Roman historian in his *Lives of the Caesars*).

Were the Pauline Communities Separate from the Synagogue?

What is clear is that there was close social contact between the new Pauline communities and the synagogue communities. If they had been completely separated from each other, why would there have been strife between them? Also we should remember that, in most instances, we are not speaking about separate synagogue buildings but private houses similar in most respects to those in which the Pauline house churches met. Those people who met in the synagogues prior to the arrival of the Pauline mission in a particular place would still know each other despite possibly taking on new affiliations. So some members of Paul's house churches would have been friends or former friends of Jews in the synagogues. Sociological approaches rightly deal with people as members of groups rather than simply as individuals. However, the outcome of this is that there seems no place then for dual membership, so individuals must be placed in a particular category, belonging exclusively to one community or the other rather than (temporarily at least) possibly to both.

In some instances at least, the Pauline house churches had their origins in or around the synagogue, since many of Paul's converts would have been former proselytes (God-fearers), or adherents of the synagogue. So whilst these new communities would have been mostly Gentile, they were also greatly influenced by former membership in, or adherence to, the Jewish community (except possibly in some cases such as I Thessalonians). In this respect the Roman Christian community is especially noteworthy.

It appears that Christianity at Rome had Jewish roots. There is a scholarly consensus that the Christ movement in Rome began among Jews. Ambrosiaster, one of the early Church Fathers notes about the Roman Christians: 'Some of the Jews who had come to believe (in Christ) passed on to the Romans (the tradition) that they should acknowledge Christ and keep the law... that without seeing any signs or miracles and without any of the apostles, they came to embrace faith in Christ, though according to a Jewish rite'. In Rome, as distinct from Alexandria, the synagogues operated independently of one another. There may even have been what we might anachronistically term Christian synagogues. The Christian faith, it seems, began with Jews who possibly had moved to Rome from elsewhere. It probably developed eventually in Gentile house churches where Pauline converts also moved from the East to live in Rome. The nucleus of the new believers in Rome was therefore people who were either Jewish by birth, proselytes, or former adherents to the synagogue.

By the time that Paul writes to the Romans, there is evidence of a powerful Christian community who are self-consciously living and advocating a Gentile-Christian lifestyle (Romans 11, 14-15) over against Jews or Jewish Christians still attached to the synagogue. There is, nevertheless, no sign of Judaizers or of Judaizing tendencies in Romans. So what was the likely composition of the Roman Christian community when Paul wrote his letter to them around 57 CE?

That there were Jews or proselytes who believed in Jesus is fairly certain. Mark Nanos (*The Mystery of Romans*) has argued that the Christ-believers in Rome were still very much part of the synagogue community. Around the time that Paul wrote to them, however, Gentiles attached to the synagogue began to develop a specific sub-group identity as Gentile Christians, asserting their freedom to eat and to observe or not observe festivals (possibly Jewish ones). This meant that there were several more identifiable groups attached to, or part of, the synagogue and in conflict about lifestyle.