

The Nature of Romans: A Summary of Paul's Theology?

Is Romans a real letter? Or is it a theological treatise, a summary of Paul's theology as the Church and even scholars usually define it? Romans is a very long and intensively theological text. However, it begins and ends in the format typical of the rest of Paul's letters (see chapter 1 and also 15:14-16:27).

Should it be regarded as a theological treatise or as a letter to the church at Rome? There has been much debate on this, as attested in the volume of essays entitled *The Romans Debate* (edited by K.P. Donfried, 1991).

Many and varied reasons have been proposed for the composition of the letter:

- 1) Romans is a letter of introduction from Paul to the church at Rome.
- 2) Romans is an outline of Paul's gospel or theology, his last will and testament.
- 3) Romans was written to assert Paul's apostolic authority in a church with no apostolic founder.
- 4) Romans is a secret letter to Jerusalem which Paul is about to visit with the collection.
- 5) Romans is a circular letter to all the Gentile churches.
- 6) Romans is written in order to bring peace to divided Christ-believing communities in Rome.
- 7) Romans is about Paul's mission and how it serves God's purpose for both Jew and Gentile.
- 8) Romans is about the status of Jewishness in the church and of other Jews now that Christ has come (since many Jews are rejecting the gospel).

Paul's Theological Responses in Romans

Paul responds to questions in many sections of Romans. These may be purely rhetorical questions introduced by Paul himself in order to artificially advance his own argument. This dialogical or diatribe style need not imply that purely hypothetical issues are being discussed, but simply that Paul decided to set them out in this way for the sake of clarification. Also, since he has not yet visited the Romans, he may wish to discuss these issues indirectly rather than 'head on' to avoid giving offence.

When we consider the dialogical questions that Paul introduces in the letter, we find that there are ten to which Paul responds with the words *mē genoito*, literally: 'let it not happen' or 'God forbid'. In other words, these are wrong conclusions that might be drawn from what Paul says, so he refutes them in advance by denying that he is saying any such thing (see 3:3, 5, 31; 6:1, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11).

Starting one's discussion with a question is an effective way of defining one's topic. In the case of the ten questions noted above, they all seem to focus on a range of (mis)understandings of life within the covenant. This would seem to be the theme on which Paul wishes to concentrate in this letter. [Note how Paul's responses in Philemon centre on the theme of debt and indebtedness.] This does not mean that the Roman Christ-believers were explicitly debating the covenant among themselves, but it does mean that their situation suggested to Paul that a discussion of life under the covenant would be relevant to their needs.

An underlying theme in Romans, therefore, is God's covenant with Israel and his faithfulness to the covenant in spite of unfaithfulness on the part of Israel.

What issues in Rome might have led Paul to choose the theme of the covenant?

If there was tension between Jews and Gentiles in the congregations, then the place of the Jews in God's purpose might have emerged as a problem. Should Gentiles live a Jewish lifestyle, or should Jewish believers in Jesus, if they are in a minority, not begin to live a Gentile believer's lifestyle? Above all, the fact that the Jewish people as a whole had not yet responded positively to the gospel must have raised questions for some believers. Has God's promise failed? Has he given up on the Jews and turned to Gentiles instead, as Paul is often depicted as doing in Acts?

It is likely that it was a combination of Paul's actions, such as turning from Jews to concentrate on the Gentile mission, and his comments in Galatians (if these were known to the Romans), which, taken together with internal disputes in Rome, combined to produce the kind of issues that Paul confronts in the letter to the Romans. Some such understanding is necessary, otherwise why should Paul become so involved in issues internal to a church

he has not founded and that he needs only as a 'staging post' to help with the proposed mission to Spain.

If one approaches the letter to the Romans purely theologically, then the conclusion can be drawn that it consists of Paul's reinterpretation of the covenant of Israel. However, if one reads Romans contextually, it is necessary to explain Paul's personal involvement in that context (and the fact that he is an apostle to the Gentiles of itself is not a sufficient explanation). It makes better sense to say that Paul has been reported as being pro-Gentile (and therefore anti-Jewish), and his mission seen as implying the rejection of Israel. He is forced to say otherwise to confirm Israel's election and the Gospel for both Jew and Gentile (see further Unit 9).