

Romans and the Formation of Pauline Theology

One of the aims of this unit is to determine how Paul chose what things he would say to the Romans by investigating those aspects of the letter that reveal the specific context to which it is addressed, paying attention to those features that are peculiar to this letter and distinctive in relation to Paul's other letters. By starting with the situation addressed, rather than with the theological statements made in the letter, we are highlighting the primacy of the author's intention in writing. It is also an attempt at envisaging Paul's own starting point as he was faced with problems in relation to a proposed visit to Rome. In other words, this is an attempt to get behind centuries of overlay of interpretation in the Church and thus ascertain, as far as is possible, what Paul intended to say to the Roman Christ-believers.

Some parts of the letter are clearly shaped within an epistolary framework, with an extensive body of content, which can be divided into a number of sub-sections:

The epistolary framework:

Romans 1:1-15: Sender, addressees, thanksgiving, indication of the purpose of the letter

Romans 15:14-16:27: Travel plans, greetings

The 'body' of the letter:

Romans 1:16-8:39: Aspects of the gospel and life in Christ

Romans 9-11: Israel and the nations in God's purpose

Romans 12:1-15:13: Life in Christ

The framework tells us something about the context of the letter (Paul as well as the addressees), although this information is not confined to these parts. The theologizing that follows provides significant indications of the issues and problems that Paul deems it necessary to address.

The opening verses display a number of peculiarities; he adds in the opening greeting the emphasis on Jesus Christ – Son of David – although he clearly states that the addressees are Gentiles. He never emphasizes Jesus' Davidic descent elsewhere, this leads to questions: is there something which makes Paul think it necessary to emphasize this over and against these Gentile Christ-followers in Rome?

Information about the Roman Communities

- 1) They are included 'among the nations or Gentiles' (1:6), so they are either predominantly Gentile or they reside in the Gentile world, that is, among Gentiles.
- 2) As such they are within the sphere of Paul's mission to Gentiles, even though he did not establish their communities, nor had he yet been able to visit them.
- 3) Paul knows of their existence for some years because he has been praying for them and hoping to be able 'now at last' (1:10) to visit them: 'I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented) that I may reap some harvest among you as among the rest of the Gentiles' (1:13).
- 4) The believers in Rome, in Paul's opinion, know the Jewish law: 'Do you not know, brethren, for I am speaking to those who know the law?' (7:1).
- 5) In Romans 11:13-14 Paul specifically addresses Gentile believers as if the Romans were mainly Gentile in origin, or at least as if a substantial number of them were. Paul further addresses them as a 'wild olive shoot' grafted into the inheritance and privileges of Israel (11:17-18).
- 6) Paul warns these Gentile believers not to be arrogant and boastful: 'Do not boast over the branches (broken off)' (11:18); 'Do not become proud but stand in awe' (11:20).
- 7) Paul tells the entire Roman Christian community: 'I bid everyone among you not to be super-minded but to be sober minded' (12:3); 'Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly' (12:16).
- 8) In Romans 14-15 Paul tells the believing communities to accept those who are 'weak in faith', lovingly to support those who can eat only vegetables rather than meat and who observe certain festivals' (14:2-5; 15:1).
- 9) He also warns against despising or censoriously judging those with different lifestyles (14:3, 13, 15).