

Background introduction to romans

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Friends, Romans and St. Paul: A Rundown of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans

The Letter to the Romans is the longest of St Paul's Epistles and it is the only Pauline letter addressed to a Church that the apostle had not personally founded. Written by Paul in ad 58, probably in the ancient Greek city of Corinth, its destination was Rome, where a Church was well established. Paul had finished his missionary work in Asia Minor and was about to depart for Jerusalem with contributions he had collected for needy Christians there (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia).

This New Testament Epistle serves as St. Paul's introduction, both for himself and for his teachings. Reading between the lines, St. Paul's anxiety is depicted in his letters as he was to bring the gospel to Spain and hopes to visit Rome on the way. It appears that he wanted the full support of the Roman Church for his mission in Spain, but seemed to feel that his missionary labors and understanding of the gospel is being questioned by several Roman Christians during those times.

At the start of his letter, he commenced with the customary salutation and thanksgiving (1: 1-7; 1: 8-15). Next, he takes up the main theme of the Epistle (1: 16-8: 39): " the gospel ... the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (1: 16). He explains that the world needs salvation, for guilt and sin are universal and even the knowledge of and obedience to the Law cannot save humankind (1: 18-3: 20). However, people " justified by faith" (5: 1) explains Paul, have a new relationship with God, a life under God's grace, delivered from sin, beyond the power of the Law, and assured of the love of God and of final salvation (Microsoft Encarta).

Armed with much information about the circumstances in Rome, his letter does not just reflect a generalized picture of an earlier situation in Corinth. When this Epistle appeared, the Roman historian Suetonius mentions an edict of the Emperor Claudius about A. D. 49 ordering the expulsion of Jews from Rome in connection with a certain "Chrestus," probably involving a dispute in the Jewish community over Jesus as the Messiah, "Christus" (New American Bible). Opinions vary as to whether Jewish or Gentile Christians predominated in the house churches (cf 16: 5) in the capital city of the empire at the time Paul wrote. Perhaps already by then Gentile Christians were in the majority. Paul speaks in Romans of both Jews and Gentiles (3: 9, 29). The letter also refers to those "weak in faith" (14: 1) and those "who are strong" (15: 1); this terminology may reflect not so much differences between believers of Jewish and of Gentile background, respectively, as an ascetic tendency in some converts (14: 2) combined with Jewish laws about clean and unclean foods (14: 14, 20).

Recently, a Finnish New Testament scholar Heikki Raisanen, who in 1983 summarized a judgment that Paul was impossibly inconsistent in his treatment of the Law, he writes "it is a fundamental mistake of much Pauline exegesis in this century to have portrayed Paul as the 'prince of thinkers' and the Christian 'theologian par excellence.'" The impression of Paul's inconsistencies arose as he famously described himself to the same Corinthian church as "all things to all people" (I Cor 9: 22), immediately following his description of himself as "a Christian Proteus" (Mitchell, 1998). The reservation about St. Paul's consistency is less a biographical concern, though some Biblical scholars may have the right reasons to negate the integrity of his teachings. These inconsistencies are evident in the Book of

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Romans. For instance, Paul's indecisive travel plans, his blighted view of the Law, but these things surely overshadows in the way he focused about his thoughts on women, slaves and the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Clearly, reading through his letters one would be virtually acquainted with St. Paul, in his point of view about himself - as a faithful Apostle, preacher and most especially as an ordinary person.

Works Cited

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