



Paul, Romans, and the Christians at Rome

ARLAND J. HULTGREN

Early in my doctoral studies, I was enrolled in a course on Paul's Letter to the Romans taught by Professor John Knox at Union Theological Seminary, New York. On the first day of class, as we students were ready to listen to that eminent scholar with paper and pens ready, Knox entered the classroom, took care of a few formalities (greetings, course requirements, and passing around a bibliography), and started his lecture on introductory issues in Romans. First, there was the question of authorship. On that, Knox declared: "If there ever was a historical Paul, and if he wrote anything, he wrote Romans." That part of the introduction was now closed. It was time to move on to other issues (date and place of composition, purpose, and so on).¹

One can still repeat what Knox said about authorship. There is no dispute. But aside from that, the range of viewpoints on Romans among specialists is vast and beyond what can be discussed here. It is not the purpose in this essay to survey scholarship on the many issues that are debated. That has been done elsewhere.²

¹ For his views on those and other issues, see John Knox, "Romans," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, ed. George Buttrick, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1955), 355–668.

² Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 1–34.

As with any work, it is important to understand who the key figures are—the writer, the audience, and the context. This article sets out the basic structure of the Letter to the Romans by keying in the three major elements of this work: Paul as the writer, the Christians in Rome as the audience, and the culture and structure of the city of Rome as its context.

Instead, what follows is a basic introduction to Romans that is organized around three terms—Paul, Romans, and the Christians at Rome—as they are related to each other.

PAUL

As he dictated his letter to Rome through Tertius (Rom 16:22), Paul begins by saying that he is an apostle (1:1) and later on he says, more specifically, that he is an “apostle to the gentiles” (11:13). That claim was based on an experience many years earlier when he was confronted by the risen Christ. He mentions that event three times (Gal 1:15–16; 1 Cor 9:1, 15:8). The most vivid account is related at Gal 1:15–16:

But when God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the gentiles [ἵνα εὐαγγελίζωμαι αὐτὸν ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν], I did not confer with any human being.

The passage is reminiscent of the prophetic call from God to Jeremiah (Jer 1:5):

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations [LXX: προφήτην εἰς ἔθνη].

The parallels are obvious. Paul, like Jeremiah, claimed to have a vocation—given by divine revelation—to be God’s envoy “among the nations” (ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν) of the world. Rather than thinking of himself as having gone through a conversion from Judaism to something else, Paul understood himself to be a child of Israel’s heritage, standing in a succession of persons called and commissioned by God for a special role, a succession that reached far back into the history of the people of God.

Rather than thinking of himself as having gone through a conversion from Judaism to something else, Paul understood himself to be a child of Israel’s heritage, standing in a succession of persons called and commissioned by God for a special role.

It is customary to speak of Paul as an apostle to the gentiles, and so he was. Yet it is important to realize that the term ἔθνη (*ethnē*) in Greek, like גוֹיִם (*gōyim*) in Hebrew, can mean both “gentiles” and “nations.” We miss something when we reduce the term to “gentiles” only. The problem with the phrase “apostle to the gentiles” is that we can so easily take it to mean that Paul sought only to evangelize *individuals* of non-Jewish birth, not corporate entities (i.e., the gentile *nations*). If that were so, there were plenty of gentiles in Roman Palestine and Syria to occupy him for a lifetime. But he proclaimed the gospel to various ethnicities in

the nations of the world in which he lived and traveled, including Syria, Cilicia, central and western Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and possibly even Arabia while residing there, and he hoped to get to Rome and to go on from there to Spain—and perhaps beyond.³

The commission that Paul received must have been considered by him to be a fulfillment of the expectation that in God's own time, all the nations of the world would worship the God of Israel. That expectation is set forth in Genesis, the prophets, the Psalms, and more. Already in Gen 12:3, the promise is given to Abraham that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed, which Paul quotes in Gal 3:8, changing "families" to "nations." Then too at Gen 17:5 Abraham is designated "father of many nations," which Paul quotes verbatim at Rom 3:8.

But it is above all in the prophetic writings that the eschatological vision of the inclusion of the gentile nations and their worship of Israel's God is projected. From Jeremiah, once again, we hear the voice of the prophet, who prays: "O Lord, to you shall the nations come from the ends of the earth" and be converted to worship the Lord (Jer 16:19). Many other passages can be cited from the prophets, such as Isa 2:2–4 ("all the nations" will come to Zion "in the latter days" to learn the ways of the Lord); Isa 51:4–5 (God's law will go forth, his justice as a "light to the nations" and in his arm "the nations" will hope)⁴; Mic 4:1–3 (in the latter days "many nations" will come to Zion to learn the ways of the Lord); and Zech 8:20–23 ("many peoples" and "many nations" will come to seek the Lord in the latter days).

Such eschatological expectations of the "nations" as turning to the Lord in the last days are found also in the Psalms (e.g., 22:27; 86:9) and in passages within the apocryphal (or deuterocanonical) books of the Old Testament (Tob 13:11; 14:6; Wis 8:14; Sir 39:10). In sum, the scriptures of Israel anticipated the ingathering of the gentile nations at a future, messianic era. For Paul, that time had arrived with the resurrection of Messiah Jesus from the dead, and he was the apostle commissioned "to bring about the obedience of faith among all the nations" (Rom 1:5, "gentiles" in the NIV, NRSV, and NET; but "nations" in the KJV, RSV, and ESV). Presumably, he thought that once cells of believers were established in the various leading cities, the gospel "would reach out to the whole of the country round about and pervade it."⁵

By the time that he wrote Romans, Paul had already preached the gospel "from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum" (roughly modern Albania; Rom 15:19), which lies on the eastern shores of the Adriatic Sea. In other words, he had evangelized already in Asia Minor, Greece, and Macedonia (Philippi and Thessalonica). Consequently, he says in his letter to Rome that he has no more places to work in the eastern Mediterranean regions. He must get on to Rome and be sent from there to Spain (15:24, 28). Lest it be missed, when Paul says to

³ To be sure, there are places where ἔθνη has to be translated as "gentiles" (as at Rom 3:29; 1 Cor 1:23; Gal 2:14), but the term is more fluid in so many other cases.

⁴ Other examples from Isaiah can be cited (12:4; 25:6–8; 60:3; and 66:18).

⁵ Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 54.

the Roman Christians that he hopes “to be sent on” by them to Spain, the Greek word (προπέμπω) means to be outfitted for the journey. In short, he asks for their support, which could include companions and funds. In the meantime, however, he must go to Jerusalem with the collection he has raised from the churches in Macedonia and Achaia (15:25–26), that is, the communities of believers at Philippi, Thessalonica, and Corinth. He has to fulfill the promise he made years ago to the Jerusalem community to “remember the poor” by gathering funds for them from his churches (Gal 2:10).

ROMANS

The data already cited concerning Paul gives clues to the time and place of his writing of the letter. According to Acts 20:3, Paul spent three months in Greece, most likely in Corinth, prior to going to Jerusalem with his collection. There are several other factors that make the case even stronger, but only three will be mentioned here. First, he wrote his letter to Rome at the home of a man named Gaius (Rom 16:23). This was no doubt the man Paul had baptized earlier in Corinth (1 Cor 1:14). Second, he calls upon the Christians at Rome to welcome Phoebe, a deacon of the church at Cenchreae, the port of Corinth (Rom 16:1–2). Phoebe was probably the bearer of the letter to Rome. She was obviously a person of wealth, for Paul calls her a “benefactor of many and of myself as well”; consequently, she could afford travel for herself and her companions. Finally, Paul sends greetings in his letter to Prisca and Aquila, who are now settled in Rome (16:3–4). He had met them previously in Corinth. They were Jewish Christians who resided temporarily in Corinth after being expelled from Rome along with other Jews by Emperor Claudius in 49 CE (Acts 18:1–3).⁶ The expulsion from Rome apparently ended at the death of Claudius in 54 CE, which would have allowed Jews to return. By greeting Prisca and Aquila in his letter, Paul renews an old acquaintance. That also gives a major clue concerning the date of the Letter to the Romans. It was most likely written after the Jews were allowed to return; hence, it is almost universally held that Paul wrote Romans from Corinth somewhere around the year 55 CE.

The most heated question of recent decades is the purpose of the letter. Generally, interpreters say that there were several purposes, not just one.⁷ At a minimum, one can say that Paul wrote the letter to announce his long-planned visit to the Christian community at Rome and, if possible, to obtain their support for his mission to Spain (Rom 15:23–24, 28). But that would hardly require a letter of sixteen chapters; a one-page memo would do.

Proposals put forth for Paul’s purpose in writing his letter tend to be of two types. The first is that Paul, among other things, sought to settle issues in Rome

⁶ An account of the expulsion is also related by Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.15.

⁷ Karl P. Donfried, “Introduction 1991,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. K. Donfried (Peabody; Hendrickson, 1991), lxx; A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988). For an extensive review of proposals, see L. Ann Jervis, *The Purpose of Romans: A Comparative Letter Structure Investigation*, JSNTSup 55 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 14–28.

prior to his arrival. In other words, he exerted his apostolic authority by means of his letter. According to this viewpoint, there were disputes, and the community was being torn apart by them. The issues had to do with questions of civil disobedience (Rom 13:1–7), controversies between persons on dietary matters, who were designated the “weak and the strong” (Rom 14:1–15:13), relationships between gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, disputes between Christians and Jews more generally (Rom 9:1–11:36), and other matters. The letter to Rome, in this view, was an instrument of apostolic intervention.

The second type of approach turns attention away from possible problems at Rome to issues in Paul’s own situation. Probably the best known of the proposals of this kind is that of Günther Bornkamm, who proposed that Paul wrote Romans as his “Last Will and Testament.”⁸ According to that view, Paul expected possible troubles for himself in Jerusalem, so he thought he might not get to Rome and Spain. He gathered up themes from earlier letters (and preaching) and presented a summary. Earlier, he had dealt with things in polemical situations. Here he is measured and calm. The letter “elevates his theology above the moment of definite situations and conflicts into the sphere of the eternally and universally valid.”⁹ Interestingly, and probably inadvertently, this comes close to the view of Philip Melancthon, for whom Romans was a “compendium of Christian doctrine” (*doctrinae Christianae compendium*).¹⁰ In that view, Romans is not so much tied to specific issues at Rome but, from the beginning, took on a life of its own into the realm of a purported timeless theology.

In discerning the purpose of Romans, some things are clear. Paul wrote the letter to announce his hoped-for coming to Rome, his plans to go on to Spain, his hope for the support of the Roman Christians, and his appeal for their prayers as he goes to Jerusalem. But there is more. Paul anticipates possible problems in Jerusalem concerning his gentile mission. Consequently, he solicits the prayers of the Roman community of believers that he may not be impeded by “unbelievers” there and that his collection will be “acceptable to the saints” (Rom 15:30–31). James was still in control there, and Paul knew that he would have to meet with James and the elders of the church in Jerusalem, which Luke says in fact happened (Acts 21:17–26). But Paul could not know what would transpire in detail. Therefore it appears that Paul wrote Romans to prepare the groundwork at Rome in case a crisis happened in Jerusalem. If the Jerusalem church rejected him and his collection, branding him a false apostle and repudiating his theology, that would have repercussions in Rome and make his mission to Spain impossible.

Therefore, Paul wrote Romans, in addition to telling his plans, to set forth a theological statement. He wanted the support of the Roman Christians as allies

⁸ Günther Bornkamm, “The Letter to the Romans as Paul’s Last Will and Testament,” in Donfried, *Romans Debate*, 16–29.

⁹ Bornkamm, “Letter to the Romans,” 28.

¹⁰ Philip Melancthon, *Loci communes* [1521], in *Melancthon’s Werke*, ed. Hans Engelland, 7 vols. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelmanns Verlag, 1951–75), 2.7.25; English ed., *The Loci Communes by Philip Melancthon*, trans. Charles I. Hill (Boston: Meador, 1944), 69.

in his mission. He made a down payment of sorts, so that when he arrived he would not have to start from scratch and defend himself. Romans is therefore a summary of major themes of his teaching. Even those passages that appear to be troubleshooting are more about Paul than about immediate issues at Rome. Rumors about him had to be addressed. He had been arrested, beaten, and imprisoned by Roman civil authorities (2 Cor 6:5; 11:23–25; cf. Acts 16:19–24), had intervened in the controversy over foods at Corinth (1 Cor 8:1–10:33), and was accused of being an antinomian (Rom 3:8) and reputed to have taught Jewish Christians to forsake the law (Acts 21:17–21). All of these matters would have been of concern to the Christians at Rome upon their hearing of his coming. Paul deals with them in his letter. He says that believers are to be subject to the powers that be; he will respect those who observe and those who refrain from observing certain customs (the so-called “weak” and “strong,” respectively); and he takes up the question of Jewish and Christian coexistence. In all of this, Paul tells the Christian community in Rome what he thinks they would want to hear from him. He had not founded that community, had never been there, and knew that there were rumors about him.

Paul wrote the letter to announce his hoped-for coming to Rome, his plans to go on to Spain, his hope for the support of the Roman Christians, and his appeal for their prayers as he goes to Jerusalem. But there is more. Paul anticipates possible problems in Jerusalem concerning his gentile mission.

Rather than thinking of Romans as Paul’s last will and testament, it can be thought of as Paul’s manifesto for his mission in the future. To be sure, the apostle revisits concerns and convictions from his previous letters. But to think that it is his final statement, and that there would be nothing more for him to think over or to say, does not seem adequate. At the time of writing, Paul was looking forward to new ventures in the west, even being instructed and inspired by persons that he would meet in Rome (Rom 1:12; 15:14, 24). It is clear from his letters that Paul was more of a pastoral theologian, speaking to issues that arose in his ministry, than a person who would compose a theological treatise as his legacy for all time.

THE CHRISTIANS AT ROME

It is striking that Paul does not address “the church at Rome.” While in other letters Paul sends greetings to individual churches (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1; 1 Thess 1:1; Phil 4:15; Phlm 2) or a group of them (Gal 1:2), that is not so in the case of Rome. It does not appear that there was a single congregation or comprehensive organization that could be called a church. At Romans 1:7, he simply calls his readers at Rome “God’s beloved . . . called to be saints.” From the letter itself it appears that there were at least five groups that, for convenience, can be called *house churches*.

There is, first of all, the church that meets at the home of Prisca and Aquila (Rom 16:5); that is the only group designated a church in Rome *per se*. Other than that, Paul uses the language of a household to refer to “the family of Aristobulus” (Rom 16:10), “the family of Narcissus” (Rom 16:11), the “brothers and sisters” who are with Asyncritus and others (Rom 16:14), and finally, he refers to the “saints” who are with Philologus and other members (Rom 16:15).

As indicated earlier, Phoebe, mentioned at Romans 16:1–2, is most likely the bearer of the letter. If not, she is on the way soon after its arrival, and Paul asks that she be received by the Roman Christians prior to his own arrival. She would be the first exegete and interpreter of Romans. It was expected that she would visit the various house churches with the letter in hand. Romans is obscure at times, to say the least, and so we can expect that persons in the house churches would ask her questions about Paul’s meaning. Being an associate of Paul, she would be able to fill in the blanks and provide explanations for anything that was not clear.

As indicated earlier, Phoebe, mentioned at Romans 16:1–2, is most likely the bearer of the letter. If not, she is on the way soon after its arrival, and Paul asks that she be received by the Roman Christians prior to his own arrival. She would be the first exegete and interpreter of Romans.

Paul sends greetings to twenty-eight persons—nineteen named men, seven named women, and two unnamed women. Some of the persons are of ethnic Jewish background, such as Prisca and Aquila and three persons whom Paul calls his *συγγενεῖς* (Rom 16:7, 11), a term that can be translated “compatriots,” meaning fellow Jews (as at Rom 9:3). Mary (Rom 16:6) might have been of Jewish background too, but the name is also found in gentile Latin inscriptions. Presumably, most listed were of gentile background. In terms of class and national backgrounds, Peter Lampe has indicated that, given their names, fourteen must have been immigrants, ten would have been slaves or had slave backgrounds (but had been freed), while others were either free or cannot be placed in any specifiable category.¹¹

One of the most interesting names of persons greeted is *Ἰουναν*.¹² The accent is left off the name here on purpose. As is well known, accents and breathing marks did not exist in the earliest Greek manuscripts; they were added by later copyists and editors. The issue is whether the name should be accented so that it appears as *Ἰουνίαν* or as *Ἰουνιᾶν*. The first of these is a feminine accusative for the woman’s name “Junia,” and that is the form used in Greek New Testaments from Erasmus (1516) to the Westcott-Hort Greek New Testament of 1881. The second is the masculine accusative for the man’s name “Junias.” That is the reading in

¹¹ Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, ed. Marshall D. Johnson, trans. Michael Steinhauser (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 227.

¹² What follows is dealt with in detail, and with more documentation, in Hultgren, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 573–85.

the widely used Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament from the first edition of 1898 to the twenty-seventh edition of 1993. That has now been changed. The twenty-eighth edition of 2012 has the feminine reading “Junia.” English versions of the New Testament have reflected these readings. “Junia” appears in the KJV (1611), NRSV (1989), and ESV (2011), while “Junias” appears in the ASV (1901), RSV (1952), and NIV (1989). Interestingly, some ancient writers, including Origen and Chrysostom, understood the Greek word to refer to a woman. Moreover, there is no known evidence for the existence of the masculine name “Junias” in antiquity, whereas the feminine name “Junia” has been found over 250 times in ancient Roman inscriptions.¹³ At this point, it seems that the issue is settled; the person greeted is a woman named “Junia.”

Two questions can be raised here. (1) Since Paul greets Andronicus and Junia and says that “they are prominent among the apostles,” does that mean that they were inside the circle of apostles and, if so, (2) does it mean that Junia, a woman, was an apostle? A few comments can be made here, although many issues are involved. First, the circle of apostles was broad. In 1 Cor 15:3–9, Paul speaks of the appearance of the risen Christ to Peter, James, “to all the apostles,” and finally to himself, whom he calls “the least of the apostles.” Interestingly, Paul says that Andronicus and Junia “were in Christ before I was” (Rom 16:7). It is possible that they were within the large circle of apostles that Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 15. They were probably a married couple, Jewish Christians (Paul calls them “my compatriots”), living in Rome when Paul wrote to the community there. Second, that Junia was a woman apostle is now conceded widely in scholarship. It is a bit telling to look through older commentaries. When the name in question was a man named Junias, the authors did not hesitate to say that he was an apostle.¹⁴ Now that the necessary change has been made, and it has been decided that the person was a woman, there should be no hesitation to regard her as one of the early apostles of the Christian church.

CONCLUDING COMMENT

Romans remains a towering document in the New Testament and in the life of the church. Along with the canonical Gospels, Romans has had an enormous impact on theology, proclamation, and pastoral care. Moreover, the constructive theological work and reforming activities of major figures in church history, including Augustine, Martin Luther, John Wesley, and Karl Barth, cannot be explained except that they were affected deeply by study of that letter.¹⁵ It remains to let Luther have the last word:

¹³ Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, 169, 176.

¹⁴ Two examples are William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 5th ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 422–23; and Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 414.

¹⁵ For a survey, see Jeffrey P. Greenman and Timothy Larsen, *Reading Romans through the Centuries: From the Early Church to Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005).

This epistle is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.¹⁶

The likelihood that even a few Christians, let alone “every Christian,” would memorize Romans by heart in any generation is slim, but Luther’s declaration that the more the letter is read and pondered, the more precious it becomes has been demonstrated over the centuries and can still be affirmed today. ⊕

ARLAND J. HULTGREN is an emeritus professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is the author of Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Commentary (Eerdmans, 2011).

¹⁶ Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress Press, 1958–86), 35:365.