




ROMANS



Paul Barnett







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Wheaton, Illinois**



ROMANS

The Revelation of God's Righteousness



Paul Barnett

CHRISTIAN
FOCUS



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To Janet Penman Simpson
Missionary, Mother-in-Law, Friend





Introduction

1 PAUL'S STORY SO FAR

We know when and where Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome. It was in the year 57 when he spent three months in Corinth as house guest of a wealthy man named Gaius.¹ Paul arranged for the letter to be brought to Rome by Phoebe, a deacon in the nearby church of Cenchreae.²

Paul was then in his early fifties.³ This means he had been a Christian and an apostle for about twenty-five years. His first fifteen years as 'a man in Christ' are called his 'unknown years'. We catch glimpses of him in various places – Damascus, 'Arabia,' Jerusalem and Judaea, Tarsus in Syria-Cilicia and Antioch in Syria. He was still known as Saul. No letter by him has survived from those years.

In the year 47, however, Paul (as he soon became known) set out with a sequence of companions establishing churches westwards from the eastern Mediterranean region. As a Roman citizen Paul appears to have favoured making a Christian base in major cities of Roman provinces, for example, in Antioch in Galatia, in Philippi and Thessalonica in Macedonia, in Corinth in Achaia and in Ephesus in Asia.

As Christ's 'apostle' to the non-Jews ('Gentiles') Paul was keen to preach in Rome, the world capital of the pagan empire. He was frustrated in this ambition by the action of the Roman emperor of the day. In the year 49 Claudius expelled

1. Acts 20:2; Romans 16:23.

2. Romans 16:1-2.

3. This conjecture is based on several others, that (1) Stephen's death occurred in 33/34, and (2) that the 'young man' Saul/Paul was about thirty years of age at that time (Acts 7:58).

Jews from Rome and this effectively blocked Paul's way to the imperial capital. Five years later, however, Claudius died and his successor Nero made it possible for Jews to come to Rome.

In the meantime, however, another man – who is unnamed – had laid a 'foundation' in the city so that Paul did not feel free to visit Rome for a sustained ministry. Paul was determined to preach in virgin territory, where Christ's name was not known (15:20-22). Yet Paul believes he may have a contribution to make in Rome, even if not in person. This he will attempt to achieve by writing this letter.

He does plan to come to Rome, but only in transit. He hopes the Roman Christians will receive him for a brief stopover and then 'send him on his way' for missionary work in Spain, the most westerly province of the Empire (15:24).

2. CHRISTIANITY IN ROME

It appears that there were Christians in Rome soon after the resurrection of Jesus. Acts 2:10 indicates that Jews and proselytes from Rome were among the pilgrims in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost who heard Peter's Spirit-inspired preaching of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ. Mention of these Roman Jews implies they were among those who accepted baptism at the hands of the apostles.

We have no certain knowledge of the earliest years of Christianity in Rome. But, based on this Acts reference, it seems likely that the first Christians in Rome were Jews. Although Christian believers, these Jews may have remained members of the numerous synagogues, whatever other Christian associations there may have been.

In the year 49, however, there were serious problems within the large Jewish community in Rome (estimated between 40,000 and 50,000 members). According to the biographer Suetonius, writing in the next century, these 'disturbances' were 'at the instigation of Chrestus'.⁴ Riots among the Jews were probably over the claims that Jesus was the long-awaited

4. Suetonius, *Claudius* 25:44. Many scholars regard 'Chrestus' as a mis-spelling of 'Christus'.

'Christ', the Messiah-king of Israel. Claudius did not tolerate civil disturbances. His simple remedy was to expel the entire Jewish population. Among those driven out were the Jewish tent-makers Aquila and Priscilla, who were probably also Christians (Acts 18:2-3).

Since the majority of believers in Rome were likely Jewish and therefore forced to emigrate, it follows that those able to remain during Claudius' remaining five years were a relatively small number of Gentiles.

It is likely that when Jews, including Jewish Christians, began returning to Rome in 54 or 55 they were somewhat at a disadvantage, anxious not to provoke further official action against them. It is possible that the Apostle Peter, a Jew, made his way to Rome in the early days of the new emperor, Nero. Earlier Peter had been moving westwards from Palestine and Syria, and then through Corinth (1 Cor. 1:12; 9:5). As an apostle to the 'circumcised' in the land of Israel it was agreed that he should 'go' in further evangelism to fellow-Jews (Gal. 2:7-9). Based on 1 Peter 5:13 ('She who is at Babylon ... sends you greetings') and some hints from the post-apostolic age it appears that Peter did come to Rome. If this conjecture is correct it is likely that Peter's ministry in Rome would have been chiefly directed towards Jews. Was Peter the unnamed 'foundation' layer on whose account Paul will not come to Rome?

We note that Romans is not addressed to 'the Church in Rome', but vaguely to 'all God's beloved in Rome' (1:7). The only reference to a 'church' in Rome is to the 'church' that met in the house of Priscilla and Aquila (16:3). There is no other 'church' in Rome known to us from this Letter. The various greetings in the final chapter draw attention to various persons as having 'households'. Most likely, small house churches gathered in the homes of these named persons.

From chapters 14 and 15 it is evident that Paul saw a need to consolidate and unify the believers in Rome, so as to be 'one heart and mouth' in glorifying the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (15:6). This explains his call to them, whether Jew or Gentile, to 'welcome one another' (15:7; cf. 14:1).

Clearly, then, Paul saw this letter as his 'spiritual gift' in strengthening the Christians in Rome to have a sense of

identity as a people of common faith and hope, despite their ethnic differences.

This raises the question how much Paul knew about the precise situation in Rome at the time he wrote, in Nero's early years. By then his friends Priscilla and Aquila had returned to Rome and established a church in their home (16:3-5). It is reasonable to assume that these missionary colleagues told Paul about the fortunes of the faith in the City.

3. IS ROMANS A DOCTRINAL 'COMPENDIUM' OR DOES IT ADDRESS A SPECIFIC SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES?

Scholars are divided on this question. In the Reformation era Melancthon called Romans 'a compendium of Christian doctrine'. More recently Bornkamm referred to the letter as 'Paul's last will and testament'. Most scholars today, however, think Paul knew about the situation in Rome and wrote the letter to address the concrete circumstances of church life in the Gentile capital.

1. Paul knows of the reputation of the 'faith' (1:8), 'goodness' (15:14) and 'obedience' (16:19) of the Roman Christians.

2. His list of twenty-six friends whom he greets at the end of the letter indicates extensive and up-to-date knowledge of the membership of the community of faith in Rome.

3. Paul is aware of critics, who 'slanderosly' claim that he teaches, 'Let us do evil that good may result' (3:8; cf. 6:1). These are probably the same persons who 'cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned' and who 'deceive the minds of naive people'. Paul warns the Romans, 'Keep away from them' (16:17).

4. Related, perhaps, are the many occasions Paul engages in dialogue with an imaginary person throughout the letter.⁵ Paul's questions to this 'person' reflect his awareness of criticism of and opposition to the Pauline gospel. Most of these come from a Jewish quarter, that is, a Jewish Christian quarter.

5. 2:1-5, 17-29; 3:27-4:2; 9:19-21; 11:11-24. This kind of imaginary dialogue is known as a 'diatribe' and was common in philosophical schools of the era. It did not imply hostility, however, but was a means of persuasion of others of the writer's point of view.

5. Furthermore, his succession of exhortations beginning with, 'Therefore, let us stop passing judgement on one another' (14:13) and concluding with, 'Welcome one another ...'(15:7) suggests that the writer was aware of the divided nature of the wider community in Rome.

These hints about Paul's knowledge of his readers' situation point to a conclusion that Romans is an 'occasional' letter, written to 'strengthen' (1:11; 16:25) the Romans in areas of perceived weakness.

4. REASONS FOR ROMANS

The reasons Paul wrote Romans are to be found not only in Paul's circumstances at the time but also those of his readers. In regard to Paul himself we must remember that Paul had never visited Rome but intended to do so in the near future. Of all Paul's letters only Romans is directed to a church that he did not found, directly or indirectly. Pre-eminent, therefore, among a cluster of inter-related reasons, was his need to send a letter on ahead of his forthcoming visit.

To that end he supplies a travel itinerary informing them of the details of his travels prior to arriving in Rome (15:23-28). In so doing Paul diplomatically adds that 'many times' he planned to come to them (1:13), something he has 'longed' to do (1:11; 15:22-23). Until now he has been 'prevented' from coming (1:13; 15:22).

Further, not all in Rome will recognize his apostleship. He devotes considerable space to establishing this credential in this letter (e.g. 1:5; 11:13; 15:15-19).

Paul is not planning a visit to a minor city, however, but Rome, the 'Eternal' City, the world capital of the Gentile nations. The saying 'all roads lead to Rome' captures the sense of Rome's unique importance. Given the greatness of Rome it was altogether fitting that this, Paul's *magnum opus*, written on such a grand scale should have been written to the Christians in Rome. In a simple sense Romans was Paul's own letter introducing himself, giving his credentials and setting out the broad outlines of his gospel.

What, then, do we learn from the circumstances of the readers as to his reasons for writing? Much of the letter is

addressed to matters of special interest to Jews (chs. 2–4, 7, 9–11). It appears that some Jewish believers were attempting to look to Law-keeping (as well as to Christ) for their acceptance by God. Paul must point out that Jews as much as Gentiles need the justifying mercy of God in the death of Christ. Jews as well as Gentiles descend from Adam and inherit his sinfulness and suffer death as a consequence. No one, Jews included, can redeem themselves. Jews need to find the righteousness of God in the only place it can be found, by faith in the Messiah Jesus, crucified and risen. To Jews in particular Paul insists that the gospel of God is Christ-centred, grace-based and Law-free.

At the same time, we detect Paul's concern for Gentile Christians among his readers. Many Gentiles despised Jews at that time. They mocked them for their Sabbath-keeping and for their rules about food. It is possible that Christian Gentiles perpetuated these attitudes towards their Jewish brothers and sisters. Paul refers to Gentile 'arrogance' (11:20) and to the offence caused in the uncaring attitude of the 'strong' (Gentiles) to the 'weak' (Jews) in their scruples about 'days' and 'food' (14:5, 15). Paul warns Gentile believers against such high-mindedness (11:21) and encourages accommodation of Jewish practices, at least when in their company.

Paul's great passion is to establish unity in the one many-membered body (12:3-8), where unhypocritical love is displayed (12:9-13, 16), where there is a spirit of unity in the worship of God with 'one heart and mouth' (15:5-6) based on their reciprocal 'welcome [of] one another' (15:6).

A great goal, may I say *the* great goal of Romans, is for the practical expression of Jews' and Gentiles' unity in Christ displayed in the church. Due to Adam's sin Jews and Gentiles are both culpable before God. Only in Christ do they find the righteousness of God. The only source of that salvation is God himself. He is the God who is 'one', as Jews acknowledged in their daily prayer (Deut 6:4). That 'one' God is the God of the Jew and the God of the Gentile (3:29-30). He sends preachers to speak his word so as to draw the penitent to Christ, but also into the company of other believers who will, in spite of cultural differences, praise the 'one God' with 'one heart and mouth' (15:5-6).

5. PAUL'S THEOLOGY IN ROMANS: A SKETCH

Romans is Paul's longest and most closely argued letter. Famous texts like 'the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life' (6:23) are much loved and well-known. But for many the Letter as a whole proves daunting.

Are there a small number of leading ideas that would simplify our approach to Romans? Here some statistics prove helpful.⁶

Apart from everyday words like 'and', the word most frequently appearing in Romans is 'God' with more references than any other book in the New Testament. God is 'eternal' (16:26) and 'wise' (16:27), the 'God of hope' (15:13), the 'God of peace' (16:20), and the God who judges justly and without partiality. In this regard, Romans is not so much about who God is as about what God *does*, about God in action, saving men and women from the nations and from his historic nation, Israel.

This saving work God does through Jesus Christ, whose names are the second most frequent occurrences in the letter. Jesus is God's 'Son' (1:3; 5:10), 'his own Son' (8:3, 32), 'the Christ' who is 'God' (9:5), come 'down' among us (10:6), the man without sin (8:3), who in death bore the just condemnation of God for human wickedness (3:25). God raised him from the dead, as 'Son of God in power' as witnessed by the outpoured 'Spirit of holiness' (1:4).

The next most frequent references are to 'Law' and 'sin'. These two words represent the sources of the human predicament that God acts to redeem. 'Sin' originates with the rebellion of Adam, the patriarchal head of the human race and through him, with its penalty 'death', spreads to all (3:9, 23; 5:12, 19).

'Law' (focused on the commandments) came from God, by the hand of Moses. The sinful predisposition from Adam (called 'the flesh') is so deeply ingrained, however, that Law served only to identify unlawful behaviour and, indeed, inflame Law-breaking (5:13, 20). The many references to 'Law'

6. See L. Morris, 'The Theme of Romans' in W. Gasque and R. P. Martin (eds) *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1970), 249-63.

in Romans tell us that Law-keeping was a big issue at the time, most likely from some Jewish Christians who insisted that the old covenant was still in place and that man could be redeemed through the Law (as Jews then believed). But, as Paul tells us in his painful autobiography in chapter 7, Law brought only 'wretchedness' and bewilderment.

That Law-based covenant, however, has been overtaken by a new covenant in the merciful action of God 'sending' and 'not sparing' Christ, 'his own Son.' Through Christ the sinful descendants of Adam find God's just verdict in their favour ('justification') now through the hearing and believing of the word of God, the gospel (1:16-17; 5:18).

As a consequence the Spirit of God is now powerfully at work within believers, strengthening them to live righteously in a manner pleasing to God (7:6; 8:4), in particular to love others (13:8, 10). The age of Law has been replaced by the age of Christ and the Spirit, the preaching of the gospel leading to justification.

Thus Romans is about God in action in Christ saving sinful people from Israel and the nations for his coming kingdom. This he does through the proclamation of the gospel by his apostle Paul (1:5; 15:18-19) and by those men and women who were co-workers in his mission (16:1-7).

6. APPENDIX:

THE NEW PERSPECTIVE ON PAUL IN ROMANS

From the time of the Reformation it was taken for granted that the chief themes of Romans related to the individual, his sinful-ness, salvation and sanctification (chs. 1-8), with some wholesome moral exhortations for the individual (chs. 12-13) and the church (chs. 14-15). Chapters 9-11 were of interest because they raised the vexed issues of predest-ination and election.

A. Historical review

In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, scholars began looking more carefully at the passages relating to relationships between Jews and Gentiles, especially chapters 9-11. The view began to emerge that chapters 1-8

on sin, salvation and sanctification – which had previously been regarded as central – were actually introductory to the main burden of the letter in chapters 9–11 and 14–15. Johannes Munck and others argued that Paul's mission to the Gentiles was undertaken to provoke Jews to turn to Christ and so activate the Second Coming. This interpretation tended to diminish the significance of the salvation of the individual sinner as the central message of Romans.

In 1977 E. P. Sanders published the first of several books that challenged the traditional Reformation interpretation of Romans. According to Sanders God intended the Law to be Israel's godly response to its election and to its covenant God. Sanders calls this 'covenantal nomism', based on *nomos*, the Greek word for Law. According to Sanders *nomos* is not a source of a guilty conscience (as Luther said) but the evidence of God's *grace* towards his people. God gave the people a covenant-Law that was within their capacity to obey.

Sanders said that Luther and the Reformers were wrong in seeing the 'works of the Law' as sinful man's futile attempt to find favour with a holy God. Rather, the correct understanding is that God made his covenant with Israel by grace. Israel's obedience to the Law was a sign of being 'in' the covenant, not of 'getting in' to the covenant. 'Getting in,' argued Sanders, was by God's grace while 'staying in' was by 'works', that is, by Israel's obedience to the Law. Sanders has overturned the traditional reading of Romans as man's failed attempt to find righteousness through 'works' which God has countered by sending Christ so that people might 'believe' in him instead.

Sanders' views have been opposed by some⁷ and modified by others, notably Dunn and Wright who have identified 'justification' in positive terms as evidence of 'faith' in Christ and membership in the new covenant by Gentiles.⁸

7. E.g. R. H. Gundry, 'Grace, Works and Staying Saved in Paul,' *Biblica* 66 (1985), 1-38; S. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988).

8. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 335-89; N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991); *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion, 1997).

B. New Perspective: Points of agreement

(i) Romans is not first and foremost a tract to help people become Christian believers (the so-called 'Roman Road'), though many have found Christ through its key texts.

(ii) Romans is not Paul's reply beforehand to the teaching of medieval Catholicism that a man is justified by his works. True, Paul repeatedly rejects Jewish efforts at self-justification based on 'Law'-keeping and 'works' – doing (e.g. 9:31 – 'Israel ... pursued the righteousness ... based on Law'). But this was not because the Law-keeping of Judaism neatly anticipated medieval Catholicism's preoccupation with religious and moral 'works' for salvation.

Rather, Paul writes against 'Law' and 'works' in Judaism because Jews at that time were rejecting the apostolic preaching that Jesus was the Messiah (9:32 – 'they stumbled over the stumbling stone [the Messiah]'), preferring instead their 'Law' and its 'works'. Jews saw their national identity as defined in various symbols like the Temple, the Law, circumcision, the dietary and purity laws and the religious calendar. These they preferred to Jesus, the crucified but risen Messiah.

C. New Perspective: Points of difference

(i) New Perspective writers tend to see 'justification by faith' as Paul's way of finding a place for Gentiles in the covenant of God. In Romans, however, Paul devotes the greater part of the argument to the need of the *Jews*. So far from fulfilling the 'works of the Law' they demonstrate a practical slavery to the power of sin (3:20). Jews are in as much need of grace-based salvation through Christ's sacrifice as Gentiles. 'All have sinned,' that is, Gentiles and Jews. Only 'in' Christ are Jews as well as Gentiles saved.

(ii) Another difference is the relationship between 'the gospel' and 'justification'. This is illustrated in Tom Wright's popular book, *What Saint Paul Really Said*. 'Justification ... is organically and integrally linked to ... the Gospel' (p. 115). Yet 'justification cannot be put right at the centre since that place is taken by ... Jesus himself ... and the Gospel' (p. 114). While

this sounds true, it interposes a number of elements between the announcement of the gospel and the 'justification' of the believer (for example, the work of the Spirit and incorporation into the community of faith by baptism – p. 116). Thus (for Wright) 'justification' is a 'badge of membership' of God's new covenant community, the family of the church (pp. 132-33). Furthermore, (for Wright) 'the doctrine of justification is not what Paul means by "the gospel." It is *implied* by the Gospel ...' In effect, then, Wright separates the 'gospel' from 'justification'. In Paul, however, hearing and believing the gospel *is* the 'power of God for salvation'. It is the end-time moment that immediately brings God's verdict, 'declared righteous' into the present, accompanied by the heavenly gift of the Spirit.

In Romans 10 Paul states that Christ has 'come down' and been 'raised up from the dead' (vs. 6-7) and that the 'word of faith' (v. 8), that is, 'the word of Christ' (v. 17), has been proclaimed. As a direct result they are 'saved' who 'confess with their lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in their hearts that God has raised him from the dead' (v. 9). 'Righteousness' and 'salvation' are their present possession in anticipation of God's end-time verdict in their favour. In short, there is no wedge between Christ and the declaration, 'righteous'. Through 'hearing' the 'word of Christ' and 'believing' in Christ comes 'righteousness from God' *now*.

(iii) A major defect with the New Perspective is that it obscures the believer's assurance of salvation. It is no longer a declaration now of God's future verdict on the penitent sinner. But Paul writes, 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you *will be saved*' (10:9). The impact is intensified when we understand that Paul is speaking about individuals; the verbs '*you* confess ... *you* believe ... *you* will be saved' are *singular*. As *I* confess Christ, believe in him, *I* will be saved. The time is foreshortened. It is as if I am in the Kingdom of God now, at this moment, immediately. This is God himself speaking, in his gospel-word.