

Romans

Monumental amongst Paul's writings, Romans has commanded more scholarly and theological attention than any other New Testament epistle. Romans is vital to understanding the gospel message: justification through faith, the dominion of sin and its release in Christ, baptism, the role of Jew and Gentile in God's purpose – all these are treated in more detail here than anywhere else in the New Testament.

So much so that Romans has often been mistaken as Paul's systematic presentation of the entire gospel message, the gospel from A to Z. Certainly it is structured and logically connected. Certainly it is powerfully argued with brilliant rhetorical technique. But Romans does not set out all aspects of the gospel, and for this reason cannot be considered as Paul's comprehensive or all-encompassing statement of faith. There is little on the return of Christ, for instance, the kingdom, or the breaking of bread.

What we must do, then, as readers and would-be expositors of the letter, is to try to uncover just where Paul's reasoned argument does take him and why. Could there be a central thematic backbone to the many first principle truths Romans does deal with?

Letter and Diatribe

It's important to remember that Romans is firstly a letter, as its beginning and ending make plain. People do not normally randomly create letters to nobody in particular; letters are written to

a particular audience, and for a particular purpose. We need to find out who Paul's audience was, and, using clues both internal and external to the letter, reconstruct his purpose in writing.

But though it is a letter, Romans is no ordinary kind of letter. When did you ever get a letter like the letter to the Romans? It is extraordinary because of its length, because of the protracted and in-depth nature of its argumentation, and because of its style. In these respects, Romans is more like a treatise, a dissertation, or a lecture. Paul is very intent on proving something, and both the style he adopts and the persistency and force of his argument suggest that he is very keen in going on record as having done so.

The style he frequently adopts is known as the diatribe. This is a Greek term which refers to a way of speaking and persuading which was sometimes used in Paul's day. In it, the speaker engages and spars with an imaginary opponent ("Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?"). Paul's heavy use of this form illustrates that though he is polite (unlike in Galatians!), he is arguing against other positions which are misguided. But he does so in a way which is generalised and thus of lasting value through the ages.

These two elements — Romans as (context specific) letter versus Romans as (general or absolute) treatise — stand to some extent in tension with one another, and contribute to the work's uniqueness. We need to keep both aspects in mind as we study Romans, ensuring that we do not privilege one too strongly over the other.

The Congregations in Rome

A few words, then, about Paul's audience. The gospel spread relatively rapidly from Jerusalem to Rome, perhaps initially by diaspora Jews and proselytes who had been at Pentecost. Soon there was a good mixture of Jew and Gentile Christians in the capital. And yet the Roman emperors had a history of animosity towards the Jews, and had at various times driven them (or at least their leaders) from the city. In time Jews drifted back, only

to be despatched again a decade or so later (the ‘purgings’ were not systematic in any case). We know of at least four occasions when Jews were expelled from Rome, and the one in AD49 during the reign of Claudius targeted Christian Jews and took place not long before Paul wrote (almost certainly during his three month stay in Corinth in 57).

Although Paul was writing to a mixed audience of Jew and Gentile (approximately 1 in every 13 people in the Roman Empire was a Jew), from the foregoing and from internal evidence it is likely that there were then more Gentiles than Jews in the Roman churches. At this time Jews would be gradually begin-

The Key Verses

Romans 1:16-17 can be looked upon as the key to the entire letter. Virtually every significant term that occurs in those verses turns out to be a key-word for the rest of the book. Here is the passage:

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.” (Romans 1:16-17)

And here are the key words and their occurrences elsewhere in Romans:

- Shame / ashamed 5:5; 6:21; 9:33; 10:11
- Gospel 1:1,9,15,16; 2:16; 10:15,16; 11:28; 15:16,19,20,29; 16:25
- Power 1:4,16,20; 9:17,21,22; 13:1,2,3; 15:13,19; 16:25
- Salvation 1:16; 5:9,10; 8:24; 9:27; 10:1,9,10,13; 11:11,14,26; 13:11
- Believe / faith 1:5,8,12,16,17; 3:2,3,22,25,27,28,30,31; 4:3,5,9,11,12,13,14,16,17,18,19,20,24; 5:1,2; 6:8; 9:30,32,33; 10:4,6,8,10,11,14,16,17; 11:20; 12:3,6; 13:11; 14:1,2,22,23; 15:13; 16:26
- Jew 1:16; 2:9,10,17,28,29; 3:1,9,29; 9:24; 10:12
- Gentile 1:5,13,14,16; 2:9,10,14,24; 3:9,29; 4:17,18; 9:24,30; 10:12,19; 11:11,12,13,25; 15:9,10,11,12,15,18,27; 16:4,26
- Righteousness / just(ification) 1:17; 2:5,13,26; 3:4,5,8,10,21,22,24,25,26,28,30; 4:5,6,9,11,13,22,23,25; 5:1,7,9,16,17,18,19,21; 6:13,16,18,19,20; 7:12; 8:4,13,30,33; 9:28,30,31; 10:3,4,5,6,10; 14:17
- Live/life 1:17; 2:7; 5:10,17,18,21; 6:2,4,8,10,22,23; 7:1,2,3,10; 8:2,6,10,12,13,38; 9:26; 10:5; 11:3,15; 12:1,18; 14:7,8,9,11; 16:4

ning to filter back to Rome, and they would seek to re-integrate into ecclesias that were now predominantly Gentile. This gave rise to big issues of unity and integration for the brothers and sisters. No wonder, then, that Paul emphasises the united need and falling-short of both Jew and Gentile, the universal need for justification through faith, practical questions about ritual and law-keeping, as well as God’s integrated purpose with both Jew and Gentile.

Even for the Gentiles, the issue of the transition from Judaism to Christianity would have been a significant one: many of them would have been converted by Jews (many may have once been proselytes; we know that many Gentiles had been attracted

to Judaism in Rome and elsewhere), and the interface between the old way under the Law and the new under Christ would have been a source of both fascination, and, at times, perplexity. Others may have thought that God’s purpose with the Jews was over, that the Jews had been rejected by God as a nation, and that the Gentiles now exclusively represented God’s people.

When we turn to the Jewish contingent of the church, similar issues arise, albeit from a different angle. Some Jews, perhaps after having been expelled from Rome, may have fallen under the influence of the ‘Judaizing’ sect of Christianity operating throughout the empire. Others, for reasons of upbringing and tradition, would simply feel more comfortable with Jewish ways and practises. It is only natural that the Jew/Gentile issue should have been a contentious one. It is easy to see how arguments that the Jewish way was best, or, to the contrary, that Jews should renounce all their old habits and take up their place as a new second to the Gentiles because they had rejected their Messiah, might easily have arisen. Paul has to straighten these matters out. Precisely because Jews had been expelled and were now re-grouping in Rome, these issues of Jewish-Gentile integration are particularly poignant.

Although many of the individual ecclesial members were known to him (witness the names in chs. 15-16), the ecclesia as a whole was not. This makes Romans unusual amongst Paul’s letters. As apostle to the Gentiles, he was anxious to establish a relationship with them. Closer examination of chs. 15-16 reveals that there was indeed a good mixture of Jew and Gentile, and also that whilst the majority were probably of low social status (possibly slave-caste), there were also a number of members with very influential positions in society, including members of Caesar’s household. Paul particularly singles out the patrons of the various house-churches (wealthy brothers and sisters who were glad to share their own residences as our equivalent of the ‘ecclesial hall’).

Why did Paul write?

There are several answers to this question, and a cursory combing of the epistle will give rise to at least the following:

To fulfil his long-held desire to get to know the Roman brethren. As apostle to the Gentiles, he had not yet made his way to the chief Gentile city (15v20-23).

To prepare them for his forthcoming visit and to establish a

base for his future ministry in the West and his mission to Spain (15v24). If Paul could establish a good rapport with the Roman brothers and sisters, and if they could be confident of the truth of 'his' gospel, then they could provide an invaluable platform for his planned European mission.

To offer help and advice on specific 'issues' that he had heard about from his many contacts in Rome (like Priscilla and Aquila, and the many others in chps 15 and 16). These issues where Paul believed he could offer important input would include:

- meats offered to idols
- attitude towards the state
- the doctrine of justification by faith
- Jews and Gentiles in the purpose of God
- to introduce and commend Phoebe (16v1-2).

With a little more study and contextual imagination we can flesh out the list:

To explain the relationship of Jews and Gentiles. As we have seen above, this was a live, practical issue for the Roman church. As the apostle charged with bearing the gospel to the Gentiles it is only natural that Paul should have something to say on this issue, so pertinent to the Romans, and so relevant in the capital of the Roman empire where treatment of Jews may well have been paradigmatic for the empire as a whole. Affairs at the churches of Jerusalem and Rome would set the standard or precedent for Christianity across the world. If Jew / Gentile relations could be properly handled here, there was hope for true ecclesial unity in the brotherhood as a whole. If the Jew / Gentile issue is the issue of Romans (see the next section), then Paul is the man to address it.

Perhaps Paul has an inkling that one day his missionary work would ultimately lead him to be imprisoned in Rome. Perhaps even at this stage he suspects that one day he may stand on trial there before Caesar himself. If so, a document setting out so much of the gospel, plus an established and well-founded relationship with the local ecclesias could prove invaluable. It has also been suggested that Paul sets out his arguments as a kind of

‘dress-rehearsal’ for the defence he expects to make for himself in any confrontation with the Jerusalem church or authorities, and that he hopes to enlist support from the Roman brethren for that occasion.

Adding support to the above, it would make sense that Paul as ‘the apostle for the Gentiles’ would wish to lay out key elements of gospel in a systematic way in the Gentile (and world) capital, in particular that he should set out the crucial doctrine of justification by faith. From passages such as 1v16; 3v8; 9v1-2 it is clear that ‘Paul’s’ gospel is known and has been under attack in Rome, and he is keen to defend his position.

The Golden Thread

Like any other letter, Romans has a beginning (1v1-17) and an ending (ch. 16, or, perhaps, chs. 15 and 16). There seems to be a deliberate matching of material between beginning and end. 1v16-17 is key, for it is programmatic for the whole book. It sets the stage for the whole action of the letter; it provides the agenda for the business Paul is about to transact. All the key vocabulary of the letter is encapsulated in the one carefully crafted sentence (this is illustrated in the Panel). Every nuance of 1v16-17 links back to the Old Testament, whether through quotation or allusion. These OT links make a fascinating study, for in every case the context is important. It cannot be emphasised too strongly how these two verses set the course for the voyage.

But what of the body of the letter? A preliminary would be to recognise three basic parts, as shown in the sidebar.

This is all very well, as far as it goes – but it does not go far enough. Analyses that proceed on this basis fall into the trap of leaving chapters 9-11 hanging in mid-air, as it were, as a kind of awkward interlude between the alleged doctrinal ‘heart’ of the letter in 1-8 and its practical outworking in 12 onwards.

If anything (and this may be to overstate the case somewhat in order to try to make the point), it is the other way round. Chapters 9-11, dealing with the respective roles of Jew and Gentile, are core to the letter as a whole and explain so much of what

Romans in three parts

The following is a crude three-fold division of the book:

- the ‘theoretical’ or doctrinal part: chs. 1-8
- the role of the Jews (‘has God cast them off?’): chs. 9-11
- the ‘practical’ part: chs 12-14/15

Following the argument

One of the great challenges of reading and interpreting Romans is to understand the flow of argument. It is all very well to know there is an exposition of the atonement in chapter 3, a baptism chapter at 6, a presentation of the opposition of flesh and spirit in 8, and a passage about Abraham's justification by works in 4 – but if the relationship between each of these components and the reason why Paul proceeds from one to the next is not grasped then much of the beauty of the exposition will be lost.

The following is an attempt to trace that flow:

The following tries to trace, in crude and reductionist outline, the way Paul's argument builds:

Mankind (especially the Gentile / pagan world) has rejected God and corrupted its way (1). There is no scope for superiority or boasting from anyone, including Jews, for all have fallen short (2). Jews and Gentiles are all under sin and brought to silence as far as justifying themselves before God is concerned (3a). When man is

at last silent, God can start to speak. He has spoken grace and salvation through His son Jesus; Jesus' sacrifice declares the righteousness of God to Jews and Gentiles (3b). What we must do is have faith in God, as Abraham did in his uncircumcised state; this can be counted or imputed as righteousness (4). Christ's one life and sacrifice has ushered in an era where righteousness can reign in men's lives, instead of sin and death that reigned following Adam's transgression (5). So we must die to the old way of sin in baptism and live new lives dedicated to God through Christ (6). By dying in this way, the old law of sin and death (made manifest through the good Law which God had given) loses its power over us, so that we may be married to Christ and delivered from 'the body of this death' (7). So now we must walk after the spirit and not after the flesh; in this the righteousness of the Law can be fulfilled, we may look forward to the future redemption of our bodies, and we need have no fear that anything can separate us from God's love (8). Paul is sad because the Jews have by and large failed to accept this gospel of Christ despite their 'advantages';

meanwhile the Gentiles have attained to righteousness by faith. It is God's right to choose who will make up His people (9). Paul hopes the Jews will be provoked by preaching and by the Gentiles' response, and will come to see their need for faith in Christ; this is something equally needed by Jew and Gentile (10). God has not cast off the Jews; there has always been a righteous remnant, and ultimately God will regather them all to Himself. This will have tremendous repercussions for both Jew and Gentile, and there should be no gloating from Gentiles because of the Jews' current position (11). We need, then, to be united in Christ, transformed not conformed, and working together in brotherly love (12). We need the proper respect for worldly authority, and must treat all appropriately and with love (13). We need tolerance for individual consciences and scruples, not judging, but living to God and refusing to give offense (14). We should bear the infirmities of the weak and please others not ourselves, receiving one another. For Christ's work encompasses both Jews and Gentiles, so that the one may glorify God along with the other (15).

else there is within it. We have already seen that the Jew/Gentile issue formed a crucial part of the natural background to the letter. But it also chimes with so much that is in the other chapters. Chapters 1-3 go to great lengths to stress that both Jew and Gentile stand silenced and condemned by sin. Chapter 4 shows that justification, even for Jews, takes place on the basis of faith, not works (of the law) or ethnicity – and is thus a real and accessible possibility for Jew and Gentile. Chapters 5 and 6 show that universally man stands under the legacy of Adam and can be justified and renewed only in Christ and in the sacrament of baptism. Chapters 7 and 8 talk about bondage under the law and under sin, and freedom from condemnation for all who would accept it in Christ.

By now we have already reached the alleged 'interlude' of 9-11.

There is already ample evidence that it is nothing of the kind. At this point Paul has enough theoretical and doctrinal foundation of the justification of both Jew and Gentile in God's sight that he can now address head-on the issue of their respective roles and God's purpose with them. When we have proceeded through this and arrive at the 'practical' chapters 12 onwards, we find that there too many of the issues addressed would have arisen from or had pertinence to the Jew/Gentile question. These are not 'random' exhortations. The Jew/Gentile issue, and the justification and righteousness that is obtained through faith in Christ for both, can thus be seen to be a thread that underpins so much of the material in Romans. This is a vital point, one which proves to be of considerable value for understanding the letter as a whole.