

The Epistle to the Romans:

An Analysis of Ancient and Modern Contexts.

Course: MB737 – Romans

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Assignment 1: Romans in Contexts

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1. Paul's Context: The Letter Writer and His Circumstances

Paul was a man of two worlds. In the opening greeting of the epistle (indisputably authored by him), Paul identifies himself as a 'servant' (or 'slave') and an 'apostle' (1:1); called to both Jew and Gentile (1:14, 16).¹ Paul, on one hand, was a Jew: zealous for the Law, read in the Scriptures, a Pharisee, a 'Hebrew of the Hebrews' (Phil 3:5, cf. 9:3 & 11:1ff), well equipped to preach Christ according to the Scriptures. On the other hand, he was also a Roman citizen: born in Tarsus of Cilicia, and familiar with Greek language and thought (as seen in his style of argumentation and the sources and ideas he engaged with); all of which aided him significantly in his preaching and teaching of the gospel to the nations.²

Paul's own fitness to preach the gospel did not, by any means, prevent him from encountering much opposition from both Jews (who rejected the identification of Jesus as the promised Messiah) and Jewish Christians (who wished to retain 'their Jewish identity by continuing to observe the [covenant] laws... particularly the food laws which were such a distinguishing mark of the Jews as a whole people.').³

Almost certainly, Paul wrote from Corinth.⁴ More certainly, he was on his way back to Jerusalem 'to minister to the saints' (15:25) before heading out again for the last time.⁵ Having finished preaching from Jerusalem to Illyricum (15:19), Paul now desired to go to Spain (15:24,28). He was eager to come to Rome in order to preach the gospel and minister to the Roman Christians (1:10-15), and was also hoping to be 'sent on' (15:24) to Spain by way of them.⁶

Paul would not only ask on his own behalf; also a very high priority was the collection of funds for 'the poor saints in Jerusalem' (15:26). Paul the Apostle was also Paul the Pastor, who wanted to maintain support from Gentile churches (i.e. 15:26) of the

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 32; James D.G. Dunn, 'Letter to the Romans' in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 838; and Jürgen Roloff, 'Paul' in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, eds. Erwin Fahlbusch, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 99.

² James D.G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 38A, Romans 1-8* (Dallas: Word, 1988), xl; Roloff, 'Paul', 100. Paul's Greek education was extensive enough for him to employ a particular literary style known as *logos protreptikos* ("a persuasive discourse"), commonly used in ancient times in philosophical schools; see Christopher Bryan, 'Book of Romans' in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 697.

³ Dunn, *Romans*, xlii.

⁴ *Ibid*, xlv; i.e. Phoebe (16:1) was from Corinthian port, Cenchreae.

⁵ *Ibid*, xlv; and Christopher Bryan, 'Romans' in *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-By-Book Survey*, Ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 84.

⁶ Bryan, 'Book of Romans', 699; Dunn, 'Letter to the Romans', 839.

(largely) Jewish mother Church in Jerusalem.⁷ For Paul, this was directly related to his understanding of the Jew-plus-Gentile gospel, which necessarily demanded a unified Jew-plus-Gentile church.⁸ This desire for unity across national (and any other) barriers, is reflected throughout the letter.⁹

2. The Romans' Context: The Original Addressees and Their Situation

The ethnic diversity of the population of 1st century Rome (roughly one million) reflected the vast cross-cultural reach of the Empire, and made Rome a place where Jewish religion could exist and develop. Jewish presence in Rome is documented as early as 139 B.C.; Pompey returned a large number of captives to Rome in 62 B.C., and by the 1st century, their population numbered roughly 40,000. They were foreign residents in Rome along with those from Syria, Africa, Egypt, Germany and other corners of the Empire.¹⁰ There is documentation of both Jewish and other nationalities receiving racial slurs. This ethnic diversity (and accompanying discrimination) is relevant to Paul's convictions about God's universal dealings with humans of all backgrounds.¹¹

Roman religion was wedded to politics: priests advised senators - Emperors were worshipped.¹² Of note for interpretation of the epistle to Romans is that Caesar Augustus, was seen as bringer of 'salvation' (*soterian*), the object of 'good news' (*euangelion*), and self-described as 'son of the god Julius'.¹³ This is contrasted implicitly, though nonetheless sharply, by Paul's description of the *euangelion* of Christ (declared the Son of God), the power of God for *soterian* (cf. usage of these terms in 1:1, 3-4, 9, 15-7).¹⁴

Reasoner notes how legality and rationality also characterised Roman religion. Paul's emphasis on a relationship with God through faith would have contrasted with the more contractual attainment of *pax deorum* (the 'peace of the gods') through proper observation of cult rituals.¹⁵ Also, Roman priestly engagement with the gods as 'rational

⁷ Bryan, 'Romans', 85.

⁸ Moo, *Encountering*, 33-5; Dunn, 'Letter to the Romans', 840.

⁹ Dunn, 'Letter to the Romans', 840; i.e. 12:3ff, 14:1ff & 15:7ff.

¹⁰ M. Reasoner, 'Rome and Roman Christianity' in *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Downers Grove: IVP, 1993), 850-1.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 851.

¹² *Ibid*, 851.

¹³ N.T. Wright, 'Roman Empire' in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 695.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 696.

¹⁵ Reasoner, 'Rome and Roman Christianity', 852.

bargaining partners' was transposed into a Christian key in Paul's instruction about worshipful and sacrificial action according to a rational and transformed mind (1:28, 7:20ff, 12:1-2).¹⁶

Little is known about the details of how the gospel originally came to Rome, however it seems the simplest and most likely case that Jews living in Rome took the message about Jesus back from Pentecost (cf. Acts 2:10).¹⁷ The Christianity of Rome would have initially been largely Jewish and located in or near the various synagogues of the city; which also would have been the primary locale for continuing evangelism.¹⁸ Dunn observes two interesting points: Acts 28:21, where the Roman Jews had correspondence with 'Judea'; and the 'Hellenists' in Acts 9:6 belonging to a 'synagogue of the *libertini*', which he is confident refers to the Jewish Roman freedmen and their descendants.¹⁹ He proposes that Roman Jews could well have been among the first Greek-speakers to have faith in Jesus as Messiah.²⁰ At any rate, by the time Paul writes, the Roman Christians are well known throughout 'the whole world' (1:8).

Evidence from the letter makes it clear that Paul is writing to a broad inclusive group of both Jews and Gentiles (perhaps the latter being the majority).²¹ References to Abraham as 'our forefather' (4:1) and greetings sent to various Jewish Christians make it clear that Paul's audience includes Jews; and the language of 'the other Gentiles' (1:13) indicates that Paul wrote to Gentiles as well.²²

The broad and far-reaching scope of both the addressees ('...all in Rome... called to be saints.' 1:7; as opposed to the more specific and Pauline 'church') and those greeted (16:3-16) suggest that Paul is not writing to a single gathering, but to a number of groups spread across Rome.²³

In addition to the letters' recipients being scattered all across Rome, the Jew/Gentile bifurcation was evidently a source of sharp conflict. This eventually led to the Jews

¹⁶ Ibid, 852.

¹⁷ Moo, *Encountering*, 35.

¹⁸ Dunn, 'Letter to the Romans', 839; Dunn, *Romans*, xlvii; Reasoner, 'Rome and Roman Christianity', 853.

¹⁹ Dunn, *Romans*, xlvi-xlvii.

²⁰ Ibid, xlvii.

²¹ August Merk, 'Epistle to the Romans' in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 13, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. Accessed 9 Aug. 2010, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13156a.htm>, (accessed 2.8.2010); section I, 'The Roman Church and St. Paul'.

²² Moo, *Encountering*, 36-7; cf. also the language of ch. 9-11.

²³ Ibid, 36.

(including Jewish Christians) being forced to leave Rome (cf. Acts 18:2) in 49 A.D. under an edict of Emperor Claudius (Dunn proposes that there were two commands of expulsion – in 41 A.D. and 49 A.D.), responding to problems ‘instigated by Chrestus (nearly universally understood to refer to Christ)’.²⁴

For the Roman authorities, unbelieving Jews arguing with believing Jews would have appeared to be an internal issue.²⁵ Hostile attitudes toward the Jews are well-documented for this period, and this conflict would have been happily dealt with by expulsion.²⁶ Furthermore, their expulsion from Rome, we can be quite certain, would have left the Roman churches under Gentile leadership. The flames of conflict over Jew/Gentile tensions which likely caused the Jewish expulsion would thus be rekindled upon the return of Jews to Rome.²⁷

Dunn also observes the additional pressure that tax-collection sensitivities would have placed on both Jewish and Gentile Christians in and around the year 58, and thus close to the time of writing.²⁸ The letter (particularly at the opening of the 14th and 15th chapters) well reflects Paul’s concern to resolve these tensions (Jew & Gentile, old & new, law & spirit, ‘strong’ & ‘weak’) and bring peace and unity to the churches.²⁹

3. Your Context: The Life-Setting of One Contemporary Reader

The current ministry and mission context for this reader of Paul’s epistle to the Roman Christians is Aotearoa/New Zealand (A/NZ). A/NZ is one of 27 countries in the world with dual official languages (English and Maori).³⁰ The nation (and particularly Tamaki/Auckland, its most highly populated region) is diverse in its global ethnic representation.³¹ It has earned a reputation as being both ecologically ‘clean and green’, and ‘peace-loving’ on the plane of international politics.

In spite of these diverse, inclusive, clean, green and peaceful images, there are less pleasant ones. Public issues range from concerns over how to manage high immigration

²⁴ Dunn, ‘Letter to the Romans’, 838-9; Dunn, *Romans*, xlix; Moo, *Encountering*, 37.

²⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, xlix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, l-li.

²⁷ Dunn, ‘Letter to the Romans’, 839.

²⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, liii-liv.

²⁹ Reasoner, ‘Rome and Roman Christianity’, 854.

³⁰ Infoplease, ‘Languages by Countries’, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0855611.html>, (accessed 7.8.2010).

³¹ Ministry of Social Development, ‘Ethnic Composition of the Population’, *The Social Report*. <http://www.socialreport.msd.govt.nz/people/ethnic-composition-population.html>, (accessed 9.8.2010).

levels, how to provide quality education for young students, as well as how to deal with a national problem with alcohol that seems to be going from bad to worse. In terms of ministry and mission, the diversity of the church in A/NZ reflects well the national representation of all kinds of nationalities. However, the church represents a relatively small minority of the national population, and fails to be a consistently significant influence.

There are obvious differences between first century Roman Christianity and twenty-first century A/NZ, which are less relevant for this essay, such as technological and scientific advances. More relevant, however, would be that A/NZ is thought to be largely 'secular', whereas Roman religion was established and official. One can still see the religiosity, but it takes more than merely strolling past the temple to the Emperor.

The similarities, though, are of unique interest. Both the churches of Rome and those of A/NZ can feel quite small and pressured by the looming state. A still sharper similarity is that the Christianity of A/NZ suffers divisions which are quite directly analogous to those of Roman Christianity. Instead of divisions over the Jewish Law, such as Sabbath, dietary laws and circumcision, the church of A/NZ divides over a range of things such as denomination, style of worship service, views on biological evolution, views on spiritual gifts and healing, and more.

Awareness of these differences and similarities will yield much fruit in terms of discerning and applying Paul's strong plea for the unity and obedience of faith. Now as then, the 'strong' must bear with the 'weak' (chapters 14-15), without assuming which of the two they are! Members of the body must not think too highly of themselves and share in the joy or pain of the other members (chapter 12). 'Jew' must bear with 'Gentile' – and share together the faith and promises in Christ.

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