

EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS

Approximate date: 56-58 C.E.

Time period: transition of Paul's ministry work from the Eastern to Western Mediterranean

Author: the Apostle Paul with Tertius (secretary)

Location of author: Corinth/Achaia or Cenchrea

Target audience and their location: Jewish and non-Jewish Believers in Rome

People:

Paul, Phoebe, Priscilla, Aquila, Epenetus, Mary, Andronicus, Junias (or Junia),¹ Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Apelles, Aristobulus, Herodion, Narcissus, Tryphema, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Julia, Nereus, Olympas, Timothy, Lucius, Jason, Sosipater, Tertius, Gaius, Erastus

People mentioned:

Yeshua the Messiah, David, Abraham, Pharaoh, Moses, Sarah, Rebecca, Isaac, Jacob, Esau, Hosea, Isaiah, Benjamin, Elijah, Baal (pagan god)

Places:

Rome, Jerusalem, Illyricum, Spain, Cenchrea, Asia

Key Themes:

Paul's writes about a strong desire to visit Rome / rebellion of humanity toward God / God's natural revelation to all human beings in Creation / just penalties for those who judge others harshly or unfairly / the breaking of the Torah by some Jewish Believers / responsibilities of being a proper Jew / justification for Jew and non-Jew through Messiah Yeshua / the God of Israel as the God for all people / faithfulness of Abraham as our example to follow / peace and good character brought to individuals through the Messiah / the death of the old, sinful self through faith in Yeshua / release or "death" to (the penalties of) the Torah pronounced upon sinners / Paul's talks about how the Torah is to reveal a person's fallen sin nature / the ability to overcome the temptations of sin via faith in Yeshua / Paul's anguish over the (then-)spiritual state of his Jewish brethren / Paul's desire to see his fellow Jews come to faith in Yeshua / preservation of a faithful remnant within Israel / responsibility of non-Jewish Believers to provoke Jews to jealousy for faith in Yeshua / analogy of the olive tree of Israel / promise of God to restore all Israel / the offering up of Believers as a living sacrifice to God / submission to civil authority / need to love one another / need not to look down on others in regard to eating or not eating, and observing or not observing certain special days / building up others in the Body of Messiah / Paul's special ministry work among the nations / Paul's commendations to Believers interacting with the Roman assembly

Key Scriptures: Romans 1:19-20; 2:9-11; 3:27-31; 5:1-5; 6:1-7; 7:22-25; 8:14-15; 11:25-30; 13:8-10; 16:17-19 / **Introduction** (1:1-15); **Doctrinal Exposition** (1:16-8:39); **An Historical Problem** (9:1-11:36); **Practical Exhortations** (12:1-15:13); **Conclusion** (15:14-16:27)²

¹ Consult the available entries for this person in Peter Lampe, "Junias," in *ABD*, 3:1127; Bonnie Thurston, "Junia," in *EDB*, pp 756-757.

² Cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 427-431.

Theological Summary: All ancient authorities are agreed that the Apostle Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans, as there were no disputes in early Christian history made about the authorship of this letter. The affirmation of genuine Pauline authorship continues until today, even among liberal scholars, where Romans is upheld as the main authentic letter from the Apostle, by which all other claimed Pauline writings must be compared. A liberal resource like *IDB* describes how, “The authenticity of the letter is not seriously questioned and is not, in fact, open to question. The rejection of Romans involves the rejection of all the Pauline letters, for there is no other letter with any greater claim to authenticity which could serve as a standard of comparison.”³ Second and Third Century Christianity used Romans, along with 1&2 Corinthians, and Galatians, to establish much of its early theology. Romans stands as the longest of all the individual Pauline letters, and is often viewed as being the most significant. Without a doubt, the Epistle to the Romans lays out how Paul elaborated upon the significance of the good news to a broad audience of Jews, Greeks, and Romans. Romans 1:16 says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Paul makes the salvation message one that is readily available to all members of the human race, because all have been subject to the common curse of sin.

The purpose for Paul’s writing this letter was to prepare the Roman Believers for a personal visit from him. Paul’s work in the East had largely been accomplished, and now he was planning to expand it to the West. Just as cities like Antioch and Ephesus had served as a staging area for Paul and his associates to use for evangelizing the East, Paul was planning to use Rome as a hub for evangelizing the West, as he indicated a desire to travel to Spain (1:10-15; 15:24, 28).⁴

Romans demonstrates all of the main characteristics of being a well thought out epistle. Paul’s friends were with him when he wrote this letter (16:21-23). The letter was specifically written down by Tertius, a scribe who issued his own greeting (16:22). Much of what Paul writes to the Romans is in the form of sermon-like vignettes, as Romans was an epistle composed to a group of Believers whom Paul had never met before in person (even though he did know of various individuals in the Roman assembly, and they knew of him), and he needed to explain himself rather fully. Because of this, what he writes in this letter basically presents what his ministry service is all about, and some of the major things that he teaches. Phoebe was given the responsibility of taking the letter to the Roman Believers, and was commended for her great service (16:1-2). With this, she was also probably given the authority to explain difficult-to-understand concepts witnessed in the letter.

While there is not total agreement among interpreters, Paul’s Roman audience was likely a mixed group of both Jewish and non-Jewish Believers.⁵ The group of Messiah followers in Rome was not founded by Paul (cf. 15:20-22), but likely by Jews from Rome who had seen the Holy Spirit poured out at *Shavuot*/Pentecost. Paul would have known about the Roman community of faith from Jewish Believers such as Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18:2), who had been among those expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius.⁶ One of the distinct reasons for Paul writing his letter was likely because there were fellowship issues among the Roman Believers after Claudius’ death. Jewish Believers were returning to Rome, and the non-Jewish leaders in the congregation who did not have to leave Rome, had difficulty sharing leadership with them, with a power struggle ensuing. Paul warns these non-Jewish Believers not to have an attitude of superiority to their fellow Jewish brethren (11:17-32).⁷ There have been discussions among interpreters as to whether or not the Roman group of Messiah followers was actually factionalized and split up into various sub-sectors, different home

³ F.W. Beare, “Romans, Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:112; cf. Charles D. Myers, Jr., “Romans, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 5:816.

⁴ Cf. Beare, “Romans, Letter to the,” in *IDB*, 4:114-115; D.G. Miller, “Romans, Epistle to,” in *ISBE*, 4:223; J.D.G. Dunn, “Romans, Letter to the,” in Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), pp 839-840; Carson and Moo, pp 393-394.

⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 405-406; Dunn, “Romans, Letter to the,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 838-839; Carson and Moo, pp 394-398.

⁶ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 403-404.

⁷ Cf. Myers, “Romans, Epistle to the,” in *ABD*, 5:820; John Reumann, “Romans, Letter to the,” in *EDB*, 1136; John Reumann, “Romans,” in *ECB*, 1278.

gatherings that would assemble together as a larger group on occasion.⁸ Much of this can depend on how a reader approaches the material in ch. 16.⁹

Examiners of Romans tend to place the date of the epistle being composed sometime between 56-58 C.E., during Paul's Third Missionary Journey,¹⁰ and possibly concurrent with some tax issues that had arisen in Rome during the reign of Nero.¹¹ Romans was written by Paul prior to his going back to Jerusalem with offerings (15:25-28), and it follows his composition of 1&2 Corinthians. A most likely place for the composition of Romans is either in Corinth (adjacent to Achaia) or Cenchrea (16:1).¹² A Corinthian location, for the letter being written, might account for some of the strong remarks made about idolatry and homosexuality encountered in ch. 1.

While there have been those in the Messianic community who would like to think that Paul's letter to the Romans was written in Hebrew or Aramaic, the history surrounding the letter's composition reveals otherwise, when we consider the audience. *IDB* explains, "When Paul wrote his letter, this church was well established and already known and esteemed throughout the Christian world (1:8; 15:23-29). It was composed mainly of Gentiles, with a certain number of Jewish members, and was certainly a Greek-speaking community, which means that its membership was drawn chiefly from the Levantine population of the city. This Greek character continued until the later years of the second century, for it is not until then that we find the earliest Latin documents of the Roman church."¹³ Yet, simply because Paul's audience was largely Greek speaking, does not by any means diminish the fact that Paul's letter is very Hebraic in character. All readers of Romans must acknowledge the strong reliance that the epistle has on the Tanach Scriptures, especially given the many intertextual quotes and allusions that are witnessed. The concept of justification by faith (1:17), for example, is based on Habakkuk 2:4.

There can be various levels of tension detected among those examining Romans, as Romans scholarship today is split among those who prefer to read the text as a theological treatise, versus those who prefer to first treat it as a letter for a specific ancient audience.¹⁴ In the history of Romans scholarship since the Reformation, there has tended to be a huge amount of time examining the themes of chs. 1-8, and not a huge amount of effort similarly considering chs. 9-16, with the second half sometimes approached via themes that may not really be present.¹⁵ As obvious as the question may be: *What does Paul say to the ancient Roman Believers?* "[T]he current scholarly consensus is that Romans is like the Pauline epistles in that it is an actual letter. Although Romans is Paul's longest and most systematic work, it is still an epistle, not a manifesto, or a treatise, or a position paper" (*ABD*).¹⁶

Romans has been labeled as "arguably the single most important work of Christian theology ever written" (Dunn).¹⁷ Paul's letter to the Romans includes instruction issued on a variety of topics, which theologians in history have generally classified along the lines of: justification, the righteousness of God (1:17; 3:5, 21, 22, 25; cf. 26; 10:3), predestination (chs. 9-11), life in the Spirit (chs. 5-8), ethics (12:1-15:13), and even tolerance (14:1-15:13). The Torah or Law also features prominently (2:12-27; 3:19-31; ch. 7), and there is discussion about the previous evil age to be followed by the age to come.¹⁸

The general plight of fallen humanity, and how people at large have rejected the One True God, suffering from the consequences of sin—does guide much of Paul's teaching in the Epistle to the Romans (chs. 1-5). Paul writes about the need for all human beings to receive God's salvation, and how this is an important act of faith. Later on, Paul goes into extreme detail describing the relationship of Jews and non-Jews as a part

⁸ Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 839.

⁹ Cf. Reumann, "Romans, Letter to the," in *EDB*, 1136; Reumann, in *ECB*, pp 1278-1279.

¹⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 407-408.

¹¹ Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 838.

¹² Miller, "Romans, Epistle to," in *ISBE*, 4:224; Myers, "Romans, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 5:818; Reumann, in *ECB*, 1277.

¹³ Beare, "Romans, Letter to the," in *IDB*, 4:114.

¹⁴ Cf. Miller, "Romans, Epistle to," in *ISBE*, 4:223; Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, pp 408-412.

¹⁵ Reumann, "Romans, Letter to the," in *EDB*, 1137.

¹⁶ Myers, "Romans, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 5:819.

¹⁷ Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 838.

¹⁸ Cf. Reumann, in *ECB*, pp 1281-1282; Carson and Moo, pp 391-393.

of the community of faith and the olive tree of Israel (chs. 9-11). Paul urges the Romans to obey the government, possibly in relation to some sort of ancient tax issue (13:6-7).¹⁹ Also seen in Romans is how disputes had arisen among the Believers regarding food issues and religious days observed (ch. 14).

Romans has been used by many of the influential Christian theologians of Protestantism, and has various theological debates associated with it. "Augustine acquired his idea of original sin from Romans 5, Luther gained his understanding of justification by faith alone from Romans 3-4, John Calvin obtained his doctrine of double predestination from Romans 9-11, John Wesley got his distinctive teaching on sanctification from Romans 6 and 8, and Karl Barth learned of the importance of the righteousness of God from Romans 1 and 2" (ABD).²⁰ In contemporary Romans examination, Romans 1:26-27 and Paul's statements about homosexuality have received great dissection and debate.²¹ The listing of people within the Roman assembly in ch. 16, and particularly the identification of whether or not there is a female apostle, Junia (16:7), has also garnered a great deal of attention.²²

When reading Romans, it is important to be aware that there are sections of the text specifically directed to the Jewish Believers in Rome, and others which are specifically directed to the non-Jewish Believers in Rome. Statements like "But he is a Jew who is one inwardly..." (2:29), or "For to you I speak—to the nations" (11:13, YLT), need to be recognized as largely vignettes issued to a specific sub-group among the Roman Believers. This can admittedly make some Romans examination a bit complicated.

What does Paul say about the Torah or Law of Moses within the Epistle to the Romans? There are some longstanding debates present among various Protestant traditions in their approach to Romans, and Paul's handling of the Law. The Calvinist-Reformed perspective has largely viewed the "moral law" of the Old Testament as forever valid and applicable to God's people, with supports for this position frequently offered from Romans (i.e., 8:4).²³ The debate that continues to rage over Romans 10:4, and what the term *telos* (τέλος) really means as either "end/termination" or "aim/purpose/goal," is only a small part of whether one thinks that Paul approaches the Law from a pessimistic or positive vantage point in the epistle. (The 2005 Today's New International Version notably rendered *telos* in Romans 10:4 as "culmination.")

In the past few decades, approaches to Romans have shifted with the emergence of the New Perspective of Paul (NPP) in theological studies (even though Galatians is arguably affected more by it).²⁴ The NPP specifically directs readers of Romans to consider "the Law as [an] expression of Jewish *privilege*" (Dunn),²⁵ in that by the First Century C.E. the Torah had become significantly nationalized within much of the Jewish community, that possession of the Torah somehow merited Jews special favors before God. The discussion of Romans chs. 2-3 would understandably address, then, the issue that Jewish people are every bit as much sinners in need of redemption as the rest of fallen humanity. Possession of the Torah does not merit a Jewish person some kind of an "out" from God's judgment.

The Epistle to the Romans has a wide amount of significance for today's Messianic movement, the same as it has had for religious movements in previous history. There are some distinct sections of Romans that are quite important for today's broad community of Messianic Believers. The salvation history message of Romans chs. 9-11, and Paul's word that the nations are grafted into Israel, bear great importance for mixed Messianic assemblies of Jewish and non-Jewish Believers. There are also, though, areas of difficulty in Romans for today's Messianic community. Most notable among these would be Romans ch. 7 and what being "made dead" to the Torah actually means, the different nuances present regarding "Israel" in Romans chs. 9-11, and the Romans 14 issues of the strong and the weak, and special days and eating. Each one of these sections of

¹⁹ Reumann, in *ECB*, 1278.

²⁰ Myers, "Romans, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 5:817; cf. Reumann, "Romans, Letter to the," in *EDB*, 1135.

²¹ Myers, "Romans, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 5:827-828.

Also consult the FAQ on the Messianic Apologetics website, "Romans 1:26-27."

²² Myers, "Romans, Epistle to the," in *ABD*, 5:829.

²³ Of particular interest here should be C.E.B. Cranfield, *International Critical Commentary: Romans 1-8* (London: T&T Clark, 1975); *International Critical Commentary: Romans 9-16* (London: T&T Clark, 1979).

²⁴ Cf. Dunn, "Romans, Letter to the," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, pp 842-844.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 844.

Romans requires some more careful reading on the part of Messianic Believers, with attention given to the Greek source text, as well as some consideration for the ancient setting and context of what Paul instructed his original audience. Also to surely be considered is the specific identity of the “I” sinner in Romans ch. 7, and entering into discussions about to whether or not Paul is speaking of himself, or a hypothetical person via the employment of an ancient rhetorical device known as *prosopopeia*.

Much of the difficulty present in examining Romans, as seen among today’s Messianics, has far less to do with what the Apostle Paul says, and much more to do with various modern interpreters of Paul. Fortunately, today’s Messianic Believers tend to have fewer challenges in approaching a lengthy and more fully explained letter like Romans, when compared to a shorter and more emotionally-laden letter like Galatians. There is definitely room for an improved level of engagement with the Epistle to the Romans, or at the very least with some more targeted examination needed with various sections of the letter. In the future, Messianic understanding and application of Paul’s letter to the Romans will surely blossom, and bring with it some much needed clarity and insight to our emerging faith community.

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QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION ON ROMANS:

1. Of all the themes of Romans, which one struck you as being the most important, or requiring more reflection and study on your behalf?

2. What do you think Paul’s perspective of the Torah is, after reading his *entire* letter to the Romans? Is he anti-Law or pro-Law? What might a balanced perspective of justification reveal?

A SURVEY OF THE APOSTOLIC SCRIPTURES FOR THE PRACTICAL MESSIANIC

3. Having read Romans, what is Paul's position on the place of Jews and non-Jews in the Body of Messiah? What things do both groups have to guard themselves against?

4. What distinct comments about Yeshua the Messiah do you believe are critical to understand from Romans? What does Paul say about our relationship to Him, and our relationship to one another in Him?

5. Have you ever encountered a Messianic fellowship or congregation like the one Paul wrote to in Rome? If so, what were its strengths and weaknesses? Feel free to speculate.

REFLECTION ON ROMANS' PLACEMENT IN THE CANON

Write two short paragraphs about what struck you about reading Paul's letter to the Romans: