

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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As to the beginnings of the church in Rome, we can only suggest possibilities. It is agreed by most New Testament scholars that no apostle established it. It is clear from Paul's words that he did not establish it and there is no evidence whatever that Peter was its founder.

According to Suetonius (*Lives of the Twelve Caesars*) the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome in the year 49 AD because of a tumult that arose within the Jewish community concerning someone named *Chrestus*. The Greek spelling of Christ is *Christos*. Most scholars think that this is a reference to a Messianic controversy that arose within the synagogues of Rome; specifically, belief among certain Jews that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah.

If this is the case, there was a presence of Jewish Christians in Rome before 49 AD. Two of the Jews expelled from Rome were Aquila and Priscilla (Acts 18:1-3), both of whom appear to have already become Christians before they came to Corinth and became associated with Paul in the tent trade (cf. Acts 18:24-26; 1 Cor 16:19; Rom 16:3-4). When Paul wrote the letter to the Roman church he acknowledges that it had been in existence "for many years" (Rom 15:23).

Origins of the Roman Church

Perhaps, the best possibility as to how Christianity originally came to Rome is found in Acts 2. Here we read that at the Pentecost feast in Jerusalem, in the year 30 AD, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, named Peter, stood before a large gathering of pilgrim Jews from proclaimed to them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. In that gathering was a group of "Jews and proselytes from Rome" (Acts 2:10). These would have been Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover and following Pentecost feast. It would be a very good possibility

that some of these were among those three thousand who received the words of Peter, were baptized (Acts 2:41) and continued steadfastly in the apostles' teachings, the breaking of bread, the fellowship, and the prayers following their conversion to Christ (Acts 2:42).

When these pilgrims to the Jewish feasts returned home, they, most likely, took their newfound beliefs concerning Jesus of Nazareth with them and shared them with the Jewish community in Rome. It is estimated that there were some 40,000 Jews and, at least, thirteen synagogues in the city of Rome during this time. The beliefs of these newly converted followers of Jesus could have given rise to a Messianic movement within one or more of the synagogues of the city and, eventually, could have been the cause of the tumult among the Jews concerning one *Chrestus* (*Christos?*), which resulted in the expulsion of such Jewish Christians as Aquila and Priscilla. Although we can know none of these matters for sure, these possibilities are very real and intriguing.

Jew and Gentile Membership

Another matter of significance here is the fact that the Roman church must have been made up originally of Jewish Christians, but by the time Paul writes to them there is a distinctive Gentile presence. Much of the material of this letter is clearly applicable to Gentiles (e.g., Rom 1: 18-32; 3:27-31; 6:19; 11:13, 28-31; 15:14-22) and some material is clearly applicable to Jews (e.g., Rom 3:1-26; 4:1-25; 7:1-25; chapters 9-11 and 14:1-13). Further, this letter reflects characteristics in vocabulary, themes, and concepts, which would have been at home in both Jewish and Greek audiences. The Judaism of the first century Mediterranean world possessed much Greek influence, but the Greek world did not possess much Jewish influence. This would indicate that the church of Rome possessed a definite Jewish presence, else the Jewish flavored material would be inexplicable, and there was clearly a Gentile presence within the membership of the Roman church.

From the issues addressed in chapter 14, it appears that Paul was aware of a certain amount of tension existing between the Jewish membership and Gentile membership. There appears to have been a problem over the Jewish dietary laws. Jewish Christians would eat only *kosher* foods, while the Gentiles were eating meats offered to idols with no

concern that what they were doing was sinful in any way.

In all probability, the Roman church was originally made up of Jewish Christians who were a part of a Messianic contingent within one or more of the synagogues of the city. They had led a number of Gentiles, or godfearers attending the synagogues, to belief in Christ, giving the group a racial mixed, but with a Jewish dominance. When the Jewish Christians were expelled by Claudius in 49 AD, this left the Christians remaining behind exclusively Gentile, a situation which lasted for a five year period. After the death of Claudius in 54 AD the Jewish Christians were allowed to return home, a return that brought tension to what was now a predominately Gentile church that had separated itself from the synagogues. Hence, the constant play back and forth between material addressing the Gentiles (e.g., Rom 1) and material addressing the Jewish Christians (e.g., Rom 2-3, 9-11 and 14-15). If this scenario is accurate, it helps greatly in interpreting this letter.

The Story Behind the Letter

Every letter has a story behind it. This is especially so with personal letters such as we have here in Paul's letter to the church in Rome. Questions that can open up the story of this letter concern who wrote it, to whom was it written, when was it written, how was it written, and, most importantly, why was it written.

The answer to these questions can be found within the text of the letter itself and in external historical sources. The writer and recipients of this letter are stated in the opening lines. Paul the Apostle of Christ is writing to the Christians in Rome. The date of the letter may be learned from internal data such as events and persons mentioned that can be traced to a certain time and place. External sources very useful for dating such a document. This is especially so with this letter in that it has a historical timeline behind it which allows scholars to date it fairly accurately. The location from which it was written may be determined by internal data, with the support of another writing containing information related to Paul's activities during this period of time.

Of course, the most important data in determining a letter's story is found in the content of the letter itself. These can be determined by looking

for stated purposes within the letter, issues addressed, questions asked or answered, and themes developed within the letter. Themes found within the letter are very important in determining why the letter was written. This letter of Paul to the church in Rome is an “occasional letter,” which means that there was an “occasion” or “circumstances” which called for the writing of the letter. The more we know about these circumstances, the better we will understand the letter.

Recreating the Story

What one must do to recreate the story of a letter is structure the story of the letter in a way that allows the reader to see the particulars of the story played out before him. This may be done by determining who the **players** of the story are, the **stage setting** of the action and dialogue of these players, what **action** can we determine as occurring or having occurred, what **dialogue** can be placed on the lips of players that can be pulled from the text of the letter, and what are the issues, problem, or **themes** of the letter that may tell us something of why this letter was written.

The Players of the Story

The Players of this letter are, essentially, Paul the Apostle of Christ and the Christians living in Rome. There are supporting players such as Tertius, who took the dictation of this letter from Paul and put it in script (i.e., Paul’s scribe or amanuensis), as well as Timothy and other ministers who are with Paul at Corinth. There does not appear to be anyone of the church at Rome with whom Paul is personally acquainted. He does, however, appear to know something of the profile of the church. It is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. He speaks to such concerns as would indicate that there is tension concerning the role of the Law of Moses and the promise of God to never forsake Israel. In chapters 12-15 Paul addresses such issues as would be applicable to people who are not walking in the footsteps of Jesus; in fact, they appear to be involved in significant conflict over matters of opinion. How Paul would have known to addresses these issues should not be difficult to determine when one remember that two of Paul’s closest companions had come from the church of Rome, *viz.* Priscilla and Aquila, who had been expelled from Rome in the early 50’s by the edict of Claudius (cf. Acts 18:1-4). We may safely say that the two major players of the story associated with this letter are Paul (the writer), and the church in Rome (the recipient), which may be determined from Romans 1:1-7.

The Setting of the Story

In terms of the setting of this letter, the Apostle Paul has dictated a congregational letter to be read to the church at Rome in a congregational setting. Paul's purpose in writing was to inform them that he was coming to visit them as soon as he had gone to Jerusalem. Before he arrives in Rome he wants them to know something of the gospel he has been preaching and wishes to preach there at Rome. This information is drawn from Romans 1:11-17 and 15:14-31.

He is writing from Corinth during his three-month stay in the winter of 57 AD. This is determined as follows. After arriving in Greece from Macedonia, he spent three months there (Acts 20:1-3). According to Rom 15:25-26, Paul was soon to be on his way to Jerusalem. He had just received contributions from churches in Macedonia and Achaia (Greece). From Paul's words in Rom 16:23, it appears that he was enjoying the hospitality of a Christian by the name of Gaius when he wrote the letter. From 1 Cor 1:14, we learn that Gaius was a resident of Corinth. Add to this the comment of Rom 16:1 concerning Phoebe, a servant in the church at Cenchreae (a sea port of Corinth), in addition to the fact that a number of those sending greeting to the Roman church were from Corinth (Priscilla and Aquila, Erastus), and a good case can be made for Corinth during his three month stay (Acts 20:2-3) as the location and time of the writing of this letter.

As to the year, one must work from the date of the edict of Claudius expelling Jews from Rome (49 AD; cf. Acts 18:1-3). We know from archaeological archives that Gallio's appointment to the proconsul office at Corinth was in 51-52 AD; cf. Acts 18:12). This information, combined with the timeline of Paul recorded in Acts of Apostles, leads to a probable date of around 57 AD.

The Action of the Story

The action with which we are concerned here is that associated with Paul's intention of coming to Rome and the activity of writing this letter to inform them of his visit. In this letter he wishes to introduce himself to these brethren and present to them the particulars of the gospel or "redemption story" with which he had been entrusted.

The Dialogue of the Story

The dialogue of this story is that which proceeds from Paul himself. He is dictating to Tertius the most profound example we have of the content of the gospel according to Paul. This letter opens with the traditional epistolary introduction consisting of the name of the sender, the addressees, the greeting (1:1-7), a thanksgiving statement (1:8-10), and a statement of the purpose for writing this letter (1:11-15). After the epistolary perfunctories Paul set out to present his understanding of the divine drama of God's salvation of the human race through the coming of Jesus Christ. This drama he calls "the gospel" (a story of the good news of salvation), which he considers the very power of God for the salvation of mankind (1:16-17). Through the first eight chapters of our English text of this letter he develops this story using some of the most beautiful themes of the whole of Scripture.

The Themes of the Story

The major themes of this letter are those making up the essentials of the gospel according to Paul. He begins with the theme of sin and its enslavement of the human race, the Messianic deliverance sent by God in the person of Jesus Christ. Very important to Paul's presentation are the themes of righteousness and justification and the concept of faith rather than obedience to the Law as a means of attaining a state of righteousness before God. Then there is what many think are the most insightful pieces of imagery in whole of Paul's writings, *viz.*, the redemption drama in which he portrays Jesus as the second Adam who effected a divine reversal of man's condemnation to death, which had been brought into the world by the first Adam. Regeneration, recreation, or new creation of lost man was now possible "in Christ." Where man "in Adam" was under the power of sin, "in Christ" he was under the power of grace. Paul gives a significant amount of time, not to mention papyrus and ink, to the issue of the present state of Israel in eyes of God (chapters 9-11). The themes of the last four chapters (12-16) concern behavioral matters, especially as relates to living by a higher morality than the world in which they found themselves, the world of Imperial Rome.

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