

## St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans - Introduction

### Authorship

The testimony of the early Church and commentators since have universally attributed the letter to the Apostle Paul. First century attestation is given by Clement (first Pope), where, in his letter to the Corinthians (chapter 35) he quotes from the Epistle.

*How blessed and wonderful, beloved, are the gifts of God! Life in immortality, splendour in righteousness, truth in perfect confidence faith in assurance, self-control in holiness! And all these fall under the cognizance of our understandings [now]; what then shall those things be which are prepared for such as wait for Him? The Creator and Father of all worlds, the Most Holy, alone knows their amount and their beauty. Let us therefore earnestly strive to be found in the number of those that wait for Him, in order that we may share in His promised gifts. But how, beloved, shall this be done? If our understanding be fixed by faith rewards God; if we earnestly seek the things which are pleasing and acceptable to Him; if we do the things which are in harmony with His blameless will; and if we follow the way of truth, casting away from us all unrighteousness and iniquity, along with all covetousness, strife, evil practices, deceit, whispering, and evil-speaking, all hatred of God, pride and haughtiness, vainglory and ambition- For they that do such things are hateful to God; and not only they that do them, but also those that take pleasure in them that do them For the Scripture saith, "But to the sinner God said, Wherefore dost thou declare my statutes, and take my covenant into thy mouth, seeing thou hatest instruction, and castest my words behind thee? When thou sawest a thief, thou consentedst with him, and didst make thy portion with adulterers. Thy mouth has abounded with wickedness, and thy tongue contrived deceit. Thou sittest, and speakest against thy brother; thou slanderest thine own mother's son. These things thou hast done, and I kept silence; thou thoughtest, wicked one, that I should be like to thyself. But I will reprove thee, and set myself before thee. Consider now these things, ye that forget God, lest He tear you in pieces, like a lion, and there be none to deliver. The sacrifice of praise will glorify Me, and a way is there by which I will show him the salvation of God."*

Early second century evidence is in Polycarp's (c. 110-156) letter to Philip (chapter 6). In 'Against Heresies' Irenaeus (c. 180) quotes from the Epistle and specifically ascribes it to Paul as do Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180), Clement of Alexandria (c.215), Tertulian (c. 220), and Origen (c. 254). However, over the years some doubt has been cast over the authenticity of chapters 15 & 16; Origen says that Marcion rejected these last two chapters and did not, as was his bent, add his own version. All the best early MSS contain the Epistle as we know it but with the doxology in various places and there should not be any reason to doubt that bulk of 15 & 16 is original. All the names in the greeting of chapter 16 are Greek and a possibility is that Phoebe was first going to Ephesus and then on to Rome and that the greetings were for Paul's friends in Ephesus. There is general agreement that chapter 16 is of Pauline origin but that it might be from a separate epistle.

### Date and Place of Composition

The Epistle indicates that Paul wrote it at the end of his Third Missionary Journey when Paul came back from Ephesus to Corinth. When he wrote, Paul, was about to go up to Jerusalem with the contributions he had collected in Galatia, Achaia and Macedonia (the original Church in Jerusalem had been living off capital, rather than income, and had run out of money). cf. 15:25

<sup>25</sup> Νυνὶ δὲ πορεύομαι εἰς Ἱερουσαλὴμ διακονῶν τοῖς ἁγίοις.

Now and I am going into Jerusalem ministering to the saints.

<sup>26</sup> εὐδόκησαν γὰρ Μακεδονία καὶ Ἀχαΐα κοινωνίαν τινὰ ποιήσασθαι εἰς τοὺς πτωχοὺς

Pleased for Macedonia and Achaia a contribution some to make for the poor

τῶν ἁγίων τῶν ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ.

of the saints to the in Jerusalem.

Acts 19:21 helps to fix the time and the place of writing:-

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“ Ὅς δὲ ἐπληρώθη ταῦτα, ἔθετο ὁ Παῦλος ἐν τῷ πνεύματι διελθὼν τὴν Μακεδονίαν καὶ Ἀχαΐαν πορεύεσθαι εἰς Ἱερουσόλυμα, εἰπὼν ὅτι μετὰ τὸ γενέσθαι με ἐκεῖ δεῖ με καὶ Ῥώμην ἰδεῖν.

*When and where fulfilled these things, decided the Paul in the spirit passing through the Macedonia and Achaia to go on to Jerusalem, saying that; After the to become me there it behoves me also Rome to see.*

The Epistle, then, was probably written in Corinth during the three months Paul stayed in Achaia. Three months of which year? Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years until Felix departed – that is between 58 & 61. The earlier date of 58 (winter) is generally accepted as the date of writing.

### The Intended Readers and Object of the Epistle

How and when Christianity arrived in Rome are topics of considerable debate. There was, probably, a Christian community in Rome many years before either Peter or Paul went there. Certainly there was a considerable Jewish population in Rome and many of those who went out after the Day of Pentecost would have been drawn to the Jewish population to begin their evangelizing. The Jewish community in 1<sup>st</sup> century Rome had a history of conflict within its own society and with the Roman authorities. Josephus records:-

*There was a man who was a Jew, but had been driven away from his own country by an accusation laid against him for transgressing their laws, and by the fear he was under of punishment for the same; but in all respects a wicked man. He, then living at Rome, professed to instruct men in the wisdom of the laws of Moses. He procured also three other men, entirely of the same character with himself, to be his partners. These men persuaded Fulvia, a woman of great dignity, and one that had embraced the Jewish religion, to send purple and gold to the temple at Jerusalem; and when they had gotten them, they employed them for their own uses, and spent the money themselves, on which account it was that they at first required it of her. Whereupon Tiberius, who had been informed of the thing by Saturninus, the husband of Fulvia, who desired inquiry might be made about it, ordered all the Jews to be banished out of Rome; at which time the consuls listed four thousand men out of them, and sent them to the island Sardinia; but punished a greater number of them, who were unwilling to become soldiers, on account of keeping the laws of their forefathers. Thus were these Jews banished out of the city by the wickedness of four men.*

This was in the time of Tiberius – Emperor 14 – 37. Suetonius puts down in his life of Tiberius :-

*XXXVI. He suppressed all foreign religions, and the Egyptian and Jewish rites, obliging those who practiced that kind of superstition, to burn their vestments, and all their sacred utensils. He distributed the Jewish youths, under the pretence of military service, among the provinces noted for an unhealthy climate; and dismissed from the city all the rest of that nation as well as those who were proselytes to that religion, under pain of slavery for life, unless they complied. He also expelled the astrologers; but upon their suing for pardon, and promising to renounce their profession, he revoked his decree.*

This is an account of what happened to the 4000 Jews, however, they must have returned in numbers for again, in his life of Claudius, Suetonius tells us:-

*He banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus.<sup>1</sup>*

This would have been about 52. (Also Acts 18:2) so by the time of Paul's writing to the Christians in Rome – c.58 the Jewish/Christian community had returned and were probably as numerous and as quarrelsome as ever.

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<sup>1</sup> Χρηστός, could be a proper noun derived from the adjective meaning 'kind', 'loving', 'good', 'merciful' and could have been used as a slave's name, which suggests that Suetonius knew of the mode of Christ's death which was so often reserved for renegade slaves and the worst in society.

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There is some controversy concerning Paul's reason for sending a letter like this – was it simply his desire to prepare the Roman Church for his visit? That does seem a somewhat weak explanation for his writing of such an expansive theological treatise. It is much more likely that the reason for the letter lies in the conditions pertaining in the church at that time. Speculating that there were divisions in the Church and that Paul had been criticized from Rome does seem to give a more rational explanation. The letter has all the hallmarks of Paul's half of a *diatribe* – much of what he writes reads like a record of one of his synagogue disputes, of which, according to Acts, he had many. Paul does seem to be rendering a definitive and unanswerable argument to a person or a party within the Roman church who/which had opposed his doctrine of justification by faith only. It has been argued that the opponent was imaginary and that he had thought of answers to hypothetical questions. However, so much of the letter contains words that would be addressed to the Jewish sense of priority, - the Covenant Promises, the belief in moral superiority, the importance of Mosaic Law etc, suggest that Paul had actual Jewish opponents for whom all these matters would be of prime importance.

If Paul is opposing the concept that faith alone is insufficient for justification and that one has, not only to believe, but also to behave in a manner consistent with believing, he is opposing the views put by James in his letter. A century ago it was fashionable to accept the view that James' letter was written in 50 and so would predate Paul's letter by 7 or 8 years. It is now considered that the James letter was written after 60, nevertheless, James would have been preaching his views in Jerusalem during the 50-60 decade and it is perfectly possible that Jews from Jerusalem, James' disciples, were in Rome. Both Paul and James use the same passages from Genesis to support their arguments viz;- Genesis 15:6 *And he hath believed in Jehovah, and He reckoneth it to him – righteousness.* Genesis 22:15 *And the messenger of Jehovah calleth unto Abraham a second time from the heavens,*

*22:16 and saith, 'By Myself I have sworn -- the affirmation of Jehovah -- that because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only one --*

*22:17 that blessing I bless thee, and multiplying I multiply thy seed as stars of the heavens, and as sand which [is] on the sea-shore; and thy seed doth possess the gate of his enemies;*

*22:18 and blessed themselves in thy seed have all nations of the earth, because that thou hast hearkened to My voice.'*

James' argument.

James 2:21 *Abraham our father -- was not he declared righteous out of works, having brought up Isaac his son upon the altar?*

*2:22 dost thou see that the faith was working with his works, and out of the works the faith was perfected?*

*2:23 and fulfilled was the Writing that is saying, 'And Abraham did believe God, and it was reckoned to him -- to righteousness;' and, 'Friend of God' he was called.*

In chapter 2 Paul becomes quite personal and furious in his attack :-

*2:17 Behold, thou art called a Jew, and retest in the law, and makest thy boast of God,*

*2:18 And knowest [his] will, and approvest the things that are more excellent, being instructed out of the law;*

*2:19 And art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind, a light of them which are in darkness,*

*2:20 An instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law.*

*2:21 Thou therefore which teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? thou that preachest a man*

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*should not steal, dost thou steal?*

*2:22 Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, dost thou commit adultery? thou that abhorrest idols, dost thou commit sacrilege?*

*2:23 Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God?*

Verses 21,22 indicate that perhaps Paul knew of the incident during Tiberius' time referred to above, that teachers had failed to teach themselves and had brought Judaism into disrepute by stealing what was destined for the Temple.

It is possible, therefore, that Paul was attacking the Christian/Jewish party in Rome on two fronts

1. Their failure to grasp his point of view regarding justification.
2. Failings in their behaviour over many years that had brought much trouble to the Jewish community and had dishonoured God and Judaism and then Christianity.

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