

Romans Revisited

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Introduction

*This "Introduction" is probably sufficient to encourage you to read Romans with new eyes, as it did for me. According to this understanding the main content of Romans was written for **Jews** to persuade the Judaisers, particularly at Jerusalem, to accept Gentile believers as their equals. Romans can be seen as a commentary on Habakkuk.¹*

Paul's letter to the Romans has often been regarded as Paul's clearest attempt to explain the gospel. This is based partly on the content, but also on the introduction (Romans 1:1-4, 16). However this may not be what Paul originally intended. If Romans is to be understood properly, the context in which it was written becomes important, and may affect the way it should be interpreted. Romans is unusual in this respect also, in that unlike his other letters, it was written to a place Paul had not visited, Rome. Surprisingly, since Paul can have known only a small proportion of those who are being written to, there is much more personal material and greetings to individuals in the letter (Romans 1:1-15; 15:14-16:23) than his other letters. Those at Rome who had not met him may have found him rather patronising (Romans 1:13, 15:14-16, 33) and rather full of himself (Romans 15:17-24).

Romans 1:16 to 15:13 stands fully complete without these "tops and tails", which may suggest that the version we have could be a copy of a treatise which has been adapted to be sent to the church at Rome, rather than a letter written specifically to address the specific situation of the church at Rome. Indeed Romans 16:17 may suggest that Paul sent his treatise to Rome to equip that church to resist minority teachings imported from elsewhere.

Romans 15:25-32 provides detailed information about the timing and context of the letter. He was on his way to Jerusalem carrying a financial contribution from the predominately Gentile churches at Macedonia and Achaia for the poor saints at Jerusalem. This contribution, mentioned at length in 2 Corinthians 8, was Paul's response to the request of the leaders of the Jerusalem church "to remember their poor" (Galatians 2:10). This request was made when that Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem to oppose the circumcision teaching (Acts 15:1-35). It can have been

¹ During the latter half of November 2006, friends L and T discovered that Romans wasn't quite the book they thought it was. I have taken their thoughts on this and started to develop them (a lot) further.

no later, for Paul and Barnabas (mentioned together in Galatians 2:9) parted company soon afterwards (Acts 15:36-40). According to the Acts narrative, Paul did not return again to Jerusalem until Acts 21:15, so this journey to Jerusalem, which would result in Paul's captivity, is the relevant journey.

Writing to Rome may have been triggered by his time spent with Aquila and Priscilla, who had been forced to leave Rome with other Jews (Acts 18:1-4, 18). Or perhaps Roman Gentile Christians had been unsettled by Jewish Judaisers, and Paul wanted to counter them. Acts 18:18 also records Paul cutting his hair in connection with a vow, a vow which appears the reason for Paul's desire and haste to reach Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Once at Jerusalem he intended to fulfil the vow, by making sacrifices at the Temple (Acts 21:23-26): this never happened, but only because he was arrested (Acts 21:27ff).

As I have previously written², Acts testifies that Paul's going to Jerusalem was against the will testimony of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:23; 21:4,10-14), and was a the result of his own "bound spirit" (Acts 20:22), almost certainly the result of his vow (Acts 18:18). That Paul was disobedient is confirmed by his compliance with the ungodly counsel of the leaders at Jerusalem: "*Do what we tell you*" (Acts 21:23), actions for which there is no divine command, and which God steps in to prevent.

Returning to Romans 15, Paul has no confidence that the gift for the saints at Jerusalem will be well received (Acts 15:31). This is surprising. Is this a position of faith? Why should the gift not be well received, if this is in the will of God, and the Jerusalem saints are living in the will of God? He also expects trouble from the "unbelievers in Judea".

Moreover, internal evidence shows the main body of the book (Romans 1:16-15:13, apart from Romans 11:13-24, which is possibly an interpolation) was written for Jewish readers (e.g. Romans 3:9,27; 4:1; contrast Romans 11:13).

Jerusalem was certainly at the top of his mind throughout the period he was travelling to Jerusalem. This raises a question for which no certain answer can be given "Did this treatise form the content of Paul's very long message mentioned in Acts 20:7, which resulted in the young man falling from the window?". The timings are suggestive. Paul had just stayed three months in Greece (Acts 20:3), so perhaps the treatise was written during that period - Romans 16:21-23 and Acts 20:4 provide some names in common - or during the seven days spent at Troas which culminate in Paul's talking to them in Acts 20:7. After this point in time that Paul became under time pressure to get to Jerusalem, limiting further opportunities for letter writing.

² paulcap3_The cause_of_Pauls_captivity_stubbornness_RH_Johnston.

All these considerations raise more than a suspicion that the "treatise" has more to do with the problems at Jerusalem than the situation at Rome. Paul hoped to be able to bring the Jerusalem church round to his way of thinking, and so reunite the Judaizing Jerusalem church with the predominantly Gentile churches he had founded. As Paul was to discover to his cost, this was something that could not be done.

With this context in mind, Romans reads quite differently from the individualistic gospel interpretation often presented. It becomes an attempt to persuade the Jewish Judaizing believers at Jerusalem by force of argument, to accept the Gentile believers on equal terms, and to abandon their adherence to the Law. Paul uses arguments from within the Jewish worldview, argued after the manner of the scribes and Pharisees. The exposition is therefore that of Jew, addressing Jews, using Jewish perspectives and prejudices. The only exception is Romans 11:13-24, possibly an interpolation, which is addressed to the Gentiles, warning them against presumption.

The remorseless tone of Paul's logical argument contrasts sharply with that of Jesus in the gospels. Jesus speaks in figures, which allowed people to receive what he says, or not. Paul argued polemically to allow no reasonable dissent, and parts of the argument seem over-played, suggesting he had a sense of their weakness. We need to bear this stylistic difference in mind, together with Paul's state of disobedience in going to Jerusalem. As with all scripture we can learn from Romans, but Paul displays coercive attitudes within the treatise which should not be copied: certainly we need to guard against them.

The Treatise in Romans (Romans 1:16-11:36)

The following outline of Paul's argument provides the main signposts for further personal study.

As previously indicated, the substance of the book begins at Romans 1:16. Romans 1:16-17 is a compact expression of Paul's positive gospel message. The verses are almost a heading, and certainly the key to the book as a whole. The gospel makes no discrimination between Jews and Gentiles - God saves both alike, on the basis of faith that gives to the believer the reality of the "righteousness of God" to be lived out in their lives³. (This righteousness is often portrayed as

³ This interpretation has been one of the dominant ways of interpreting this text through church history (Irons, 2015, see below). The so-called New Perspective on Paul does not accept this interpretation, regarding "the righteousness of God" as being God's "covenant faithfulness" towards his Covenant people. However it was precisely this arrogant complacency that Jews had about their position before God (described in Romans 2) – independent of their righteousness - that had resulted in their exile into Babylon, and would shortly lead to the destruction of Jerusalem in the war of AD 66-70 – and which was the very reason Paul wrote

something judicial, theoretical and mystical, based on the acceptance “by faith” of certain propositions, but Paul expects faith in God to lead to practical righteousness (Romans 12:1-15:12).)

Verse 17 refers back to Habakkuk 2:4. In the New Testament, Old Testament references are intended to bring to mind the whole of the referenced context. At the time Paul was travelling to Jerusalem, the Jews were under pressure. They had been expelled from Rome by Claudius (Acts 18:2). Jesus' prophecies (e.g. Matthew 24:2ff) led Christians to believe that Jerusalem would soon be destroyed. Those with insight could see that the times were similar to those of Habakkuk. Habakkuk in Habakkuk 1 had looked to God for salvation for his nation, but God had instead showed him that far from things improving, his nation was going to be overwhelmed and conquered because of their sinfulness, by a people morally far worse. In response, Habakkuk waits to see what God will say to him (Habakkuk 2:1). He receives a revelation that destruction will certainly come (Habakkuk 2:2-3) and this will destroy the wicked, but the righteous will "*live by his faith*", that is they will have the faith in God to get through it. Habakkuk's message is therefore that reliance on God to protect you on the basis of your nationhood will surely fail. Something far better - "*transformational faith*" - is required in order to be saved through destructive times: thus Romans is an expanded commentary on Habakkuk.

As in Habakkuk, Paul starts by considering just how bad things are. "*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth.*" (Romans 1:17). A far cry from the Good News of the Love of God expressed by Jesus, this perspective is chosen because the book is about getting **Jews** to recognise Gentile faith (Romans 1:16). Romans 1:18-32 expresses the normal Jewish attitude to the Gentiles. Paul acknowledges that the Gentiles (in general) really are as bad as Jews believe, because they have no knowledge of God, don't want any such knowledge, and have been given up to the grossest immorality.

Having got Jews to fully agree with this, in Romans 2:1, Paul turns round and says them, in summary, "You condemn all that, but you are no better. You won't escape judgement, any more than the people of Habakkuk's day, because God judges people by what they do, not what race they are".(Romans 2:1-11). Jews have the advantage of knowing what God wants, but that simply makes them more accountable. If the Gentiles do what is right, God will accept them (Romans 2:15,29) True circumcision is inward not outward (Romans 2:28).

In that case, do the Jews have any advantages? Yes (Romans 3:1-2). Does the unfaithfulness of some Jews nullify God's faithfulness to his people? No - and this

this letter. See also The Righteousness of God CL Irons, Mohr Siebeck, 2015 for a detailed lexicographical refutation of the New Perspective on Paul interpretation of the righteousness of God (extracts: Righteousness_of_God_lexicographical_analysis_CL_Irons_contra_NPPaul_ocr)

too was the lesson of Habakkuk (Romans 3:3-8). (Paul returns to this theme in more detail in Romans 9.)

Revealing Paul's primarily intended Jewish readership throughout the whole of Romans, Paul asks "Are **we** (i.e. Jews) any better off?" No, (that is, not in the way we Jews think), because all, whether Jew or Gentile, are under the power of sin. (Romans 3:9). The Jews readily recognised this in Gentiles (for Jews, "Gentile" and "sinner" was a synonym (Galatians 2:15)). Jews thought "Jew" equalled "righteous" (Galatians 2:14-15), but Paul says the Jews are equally controlled by the power of sin.

Paul does not intend Romans 3:9-20 with its "all" (v9) to imply that every single individual is sinful. The authors of the OT quotations intended to exclude themselves (and other righteous men) when they were referred to those in their own community who were unrighteous. Paul says, in verse 19, that these quotations from "the law" were addressed to those to whom the law applied - the Jews - so he again sought to prove that Jews have no automatic righteousness by virtue of their race. In fact, v20, law serves only to provide the "knowledge of sin".

But there is now manifested an alternative "divine righteousness" "apart from law", that the scriptures (law and prophets) predicted, available through faith in Jesus Christ, for all (whether Jew or Gentile) who believe (Romans 3:21-22). The "all" in v23 means "Jew and Gentile alike", and they equally have to receive as a gift the "**redemption** (i.e. release from captivity) which is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). Verse 25's reference to "passed over" former sins is a reference to the Passover in Exodus 12. God is righteous, and he "makes righteous" him who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26). The introducing statement "to prove at the present time that he (God) himself is righteous" shows this "justify" (the word means "make righteous") is not about a judicial "not guilty" verdict, but a practical change in state in the believer from practicing unrighteousness in his actions to practicing righteous in his actions (compare 1 John 3:4-10).

Then what becomes of **our** (i.e. again, **Jewish** (compare Romans 3:29)) boasting? It is excluded. God is one (that is, the same for everyone) and deals with all people on the basis of faith, irrespective of race (Romans 3:30). Does this overthrow the law? Not at all - on the contrary we establish law (that is, we are confirming what the law (i.e. the OT scriptures) say about this question (Romans 3:31)).

Chapter 4 cites the example of Abraham ("our" forefather) and the blessing of forgiveness (Romans 4:1-8) - the Jews were obsessed with the sin problem. Abraham got this blessing before he was circumcised, so he had faith as a "Gentile sinner", but then also as someone who was circumcised but also a man of faith (Romans 4:9-12).

Hence, (Romans 4:13) the promise did not come through law, but through the righteousness of faith (this refers back again to Habakkuk 2:4). The promise was guaranteed to Abraham's descendants (Romans 4:16) - indeed he would have had no descendants (of promise) apart from the actualisation of his faith as a practical event (Romans 4:19-21 - this seems a rather glowing assessment of the events in Genesis, and is an example of Paul overstating his case). His Jewish readers must exercise the same faith (Romans 4:23-25), recognising that Jewish sin led to Jesus's death and Jesus was raised to make Jews righteous.

Romans 5: if "we" (remembering again the primarily Jewish intended readership) are made righteous (in practice) by faith then we have peace with God, and experience all of Romans 5:1-5. Romans 5:7 shows the character of the death of Christ in risking his life as brave man to save others. In Romans 5:9,10 read "saved" in its sense of "rescued", and that we are consequently reconciled (Romans 5:11).

Just as sin entered the world through one man's sin, so one **act** of righteousness leads to living righteousness (Romans 5:18 - literally "righteousness of life") to all men (Romans 5:12-18) A single act of obedience (in the garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42-44)) makes many righteous (Romans 5:19) - this relates to the positional transfer from being "sinners" to being the "righteous" (compare Colossians 1:13). Law made men accountable (Romans 5:13,20) so that grace might abound and reign through righteousness with a view to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 5:21). In view of what follows in Romans 6, this righteousness that leads to eternal life is real and practical, not notional, juridical or mystical.

Romans 6 deals with a Jewish objection that this undermines the need to live righteously, and we can increase the grace by sinning⁴. No - you are dead to all that the whole point of the grace imparted is that it produces real deliverance to **walk in newness of life** (Romans 6:4). It is the end of the dominion of unrighteousness and being enslaved to sin. Instead you are freed to do righteousness and are now slaves of God (The rest of Romans 6 and especially Romans 6:22).

Romans 7, particularly verses 1-4, is directed to those who "know the law" - the scribes and teachers of the law. They would baulk at the idea that the Law could be done away with. So he argues from within their way of thinking that it is done away with because of the death, which has freed those who are under the law (the Jews) from it. "We", again the Jews, to whom the law applied, are discharged from law, dead to that which held us captive so that we serve not under the old written

⁴ Thus Paul recognises that his earlier arguments have been over-stated in a way that can be interpreted to imply that sinning no longer matters, only faith. Paul realised his words would therefore be easily interpreted incorrectly. Beware! Actual lived righteousness matters.

code but in the new life of the Spirit. (Romans 7:6). This addresses directly the legalism of the church at Jerusalem.

This meets further Jewish objection that this seems to make the law sin (Romans 7:7). The answer is that law is not sin, but reveals sin in those who hear the law. It is sin that is the problem (Romans 7:11), not the law.

Further Jewish objection that this implies that something good brought death to me (Romans 7:13). No the problem is sin, and in fact there is a battle going on inside me between sin and the righteousness that I want to do (Romans 7:13-20). Those who try to do what is right find that there is a principle in us that wants to do the opposite (Romans 7:21-23). Worse, I cannot get myself free from this. (Romans 7:24) But Jesus has delivered Paul (Romans 7:25)

But Jesus Christ has set us free from this bondage, in order to live according to the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1-2). He enables us to do righteousness - what cannot be done by the flesh (Romans 8:3ff). The Spirit gives life to our spirit (Romans 8:10), and also to our mortal bodies through the indwelling Spirit (Romans 8:11). Life depends on this righteousness being practically realised (Romans 8:13). And we receive the Spirit of sonship (Romans 8:14-17).

The rest of Romans 8 considers what it means to be living by the Spirit in the way that God intends, and that he will give the overcoming over all the powers that sought to hold us captive.

In Romans 9 Paul turns to consider those Jews who fail to receive the gospel. This was a problem for Jews since it might seem that God had failed to fulfil his promise - this was mentioned first Romans 3:3. Moreover it was this conviction that God could not let any Jew fail that underpinned the Jewish reliance on their race to save them. But God's word had not failed (Romans 9:6), because the promise had never been universal in character (Roman 9:7). Paul uses the example of Jacob and Esau (Romans 9:8-13).

This meets with an objection that this makes God unjust, which Paul refutes (Romans 9:14), citing the example of Pharaoh, who had his heart hardened (Romans 9:15-18). The story in Exodus shows that God was more gracious to Pharaoh than Paul's account might suggest⁵.

This meets with further objections - Why does God find fault? Who can resist his will? (Romans 9:19). Paul's response (Romans 9:20-24) seems strident, and fails to answer the question, but he goes on to quote scriptures that indicate that

⁵ An example of an over-played argument, that becomes increasingly strident. As sometimes suggested as a tongue in cheek instruction to preachers "*Argument weak here, shout more*"

Gentiles (Romans 9:24-26) but only a remnant of Israel (Romans 9:27-29) will be saved. The failures are because of the failure to recognise that salvation depends on faith in Christ, not works of law (Romans 9:31-33).

The Jewish problem is that their zeal is not enlightened but they want to establish their own righteousness (Romans 10:2-3). Christ is the end of the law (Romans 10:4) - that is he both brings the legal code to an end, and fulfils the OT scriptures which pointed to him (compare John 5:39-40). Romans 10:5-10 shows that you cannot hold onto both the law and Christ. Paul returns to the salvation being for both Jew and Gentile, quoting a variety of scriptures, including Joel 2:32, in support.

Another objection: if salvation depends on faith, rather than the accident of birth, then people will need to hear the message (Romans 10:14-17) - Paul's answer is that the message has indeed been broadcast, but Israel rejected it (Romans 10:18-21).

So has God rejected the Jews? No - citing himself as an example (Romans 11:1). There is a remnant (Romans 11:2-6) but the rest were hardened (Romans 11:7-10), but through this failure the Gentiles have got their opportunity, and this situation isn't permanent (Romans 11:11-12).

Now, for the first time, after this long exposition aimed at the Jews, Paul turns briefly to address Gentiles (Romans 11:13-24). This is probably an interpolation to suit the Roman audience. He warns them against presumption. God's kindness depends on continuing in his kindness (Romans 11:21-22 - note that, uniquely, these verses are expressed in the singular), and God can put the Jews back in when they repent of their unbelief (Romans 11:23-32). God will be merciful to all on an equal basis, which causes Paul break into praise (Romans 11:33-36).

The main doctrinal treatise ends at this point.

The practical teaching (Romans 12:1-15:13)

Romans 12 starts with a therefore, indicating dependence on what went before, and the discourse changes to the practicalities of Christian living. The teaching seems to be aimed mainly at reducing the risks of strife in the church and conflicts with the authorities. There needs to be renewal of the mind to assess what is God's will, use of the gifts to build up others, and a need for love to be genuine, and other practical teachings (Romans 12).

Romans 13:1-7 considers how to relate to the governing authorities, and expresses a rather rosy view of their qualities - Peter (1 Peter 2:13-25) is more realistic. Paul probably intended to discourage rebellious attitudes to government. (But should

not being subject to government be conditional on their performing beneficially as stated here?) Christians are to practice love and righteousness (Romans 13:8-14).

Romans 14 addresses an area where differences are likely, particularly between Jews and Gentiles, over special days and food and drink. Every one is to act from faith (Romans 14:23) but make allowances for those who don't have the same faith. Christians are to bear with each others failings (Romans 15:1-4), be harmonious, and welcome each other, including Gentiles in accordance with scripture (Romans 5-13).

Conclusions

Romans attempts to persuade Jewish Christians to accept Gentile Christians on equal terms, and that Jews cannot rely on their race or adherence to the law to save them. Recognising the **polemical** character of the book helps to explain the presence and nature of much of the material. The book is almost wholly addressed to Jews and deals with expected Jewish objections.

Paul starts from Habakkuk 2:4. Through Jesus Christ, people, irrespective of race can become righteous as a reality and be empowered to live a life that pleases God. There is no other means, though the Jews have sought to establish their own way through law. The book is concerned with bringing (in particular, Jewish) believers to practical righteousness through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit through faith in Jesus Christ, rather than their desire to be saved because of their race or law keeping.

Equally, turning to the use of Romans by the Reformers, Romans is not about judicial righteousness (a "not guilty" verdict) nor "penal substitution". Attempts to prove universal human sinfulness from Romans 3 do violence to principles of interpretation that expect the original meaning OT quotations to be respected. Romans is not a manual about to how someone might **become** a Christian⁶.

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⁶ Note that the Reformed view uses Romans to establish a once saved always saved perspective based on God's character, similar to the Jew's reliance on racial descent. But Romans counters **every** false reliance on anything other than God's gracious response to a living faith in Jesus Christ that lives rightly in reality.