

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS

\* \* \* \* \*

### PAUL, THE JEWISH RABBI, BECOMES A CHRISTIAN

Paul was born in Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia (in modern Turkey). His family were Jewish and very strict followers of their faith. He would therefore not have been educated in the ordinary schools of the city but in the school attached to the Jewish Synagogue, the centre of Jewish worship and life. His separate education would have made him very much aware of the special nature of his religion; this feeling would have been intensified when he was sent to Jerusalem to complete his education. There he trained to be a Rabbi, a teacher whose responsibility it was to understand and expound to others the details of the Jewish way of life as laid down in their Law—and this Law covered every aspect of life, religious, ethical, civil (see the note on ‘The Law’ on pp. 26–28). In this he was taught by Gamaliel, one of the greatest Rabbis of the period. Paul devoted himself entirely to the training and became a fanatical Jew and upholder of Jewish ways.

Either during or just after he had finished this training he became aware of the Christians and their preaching, though it is very unlikely that he ever saw or heard Jesus himself. The Jews had long been expecting that God would send them a deliverer to free them from their enemies. They called this deliverer ‘Messiah’ (the word ‘Messiah’ is Hebrew and the word ‘Christ’ is its Greek translation; both mean ‘anointed’). The Christians proclaimed that Jesus, whom the Romans had executed at the instigation of the Jews, was this Messiah. This preaching brought against them the weight of Jewish opinion, and, when they persisted in it, soon led to their persecution. Paul joined in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROMANS

*Paul becomes a Christian*

this persecution; he tells us, 'savagely I persecuted the church of God, and tried to destroy it' (Gal. 1:13).

It was while journeying to Damascus to extend this persecution that Paul had the marvellous experience by which he became a Christian (Acts 9:1-22; cf. Acts 22:3-16; 26:12-18). He does not himself describe it in detail in any of his letters. He does however speak of himself as 'called' through the grace of God (Gal. 1:15) and says, 'Did I not see Jesus our Lord?' (1 Cor. 9:1). Just as the early disciples believed that Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection, so that they were convinced he was alive again, so Paul also believed that in his experience he saw Jesus alive—'he appeared even to me' (1 Cor. 15:8). Fully assured now that the Jesus who had died on the cross was living, he was also certain that he was the Jewish Messiah, and began to preach this message.

#### JEWES AND GENTILES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

We do not know what happened to Paul in the early years following his conversion to Christianity; when we hear of him again many years later it is as a Christian missionary preaching the Gospel to non-Jews. He had become convinced not only that God had chosen him to be a missionary of Christ but also that his mission was to be specially directed to those who were not Jews. Jesus had been a Jew and had lived and worked in Palestine, the Jewish homeland. The disciples he chose while on earth had all been men of his own race—Jews. It was only natural, when after his death and resurrection they began to preach about him, that they should limit their preaching to fellow Jews. The Jews believed that they themselves had been chosen to be God's people in a very special way. God had freed them from slavery in Egypt and, under Moses as their leader, had brought them to their Promised Land, Palestine; he had laid down for them an elaborate system of sacrifices and worship to be carried out in the temple at Jerusalem; he had given them a detailed code of laws to guide their activities; when they had opposed his will for them and rebelled against him he had

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Jews and Gentiles in the Early Church*

ROMANS

sent the prophets to recall them to his ways; finally he had promised to them the Messiah. It was reasonable to expect that the followers of the Messiah should be Jews and that if anyone who was not a Jew wished to become a Christian then he should also become a Jew, i.e. take up Jewish ways, including circumcision. Since many of the people of the ancient world had become Jews, attracted by the simplicity and straightforwardness of Jewish life and worship, this did not seem an unreasonable demand. Christianity would then have been a kind of extension of Judaism, adding to the latter some new beliefs, such as that Jesus was the Messiah, and some extra religious practices, such as the observance of the Lord's Supper.

Although Paul had not himself been the first to preach to the Gentiles this became the central activity of his life. It naturally caused a tremendous upheaval among the early Christians. For a time there was a grave danger that the Church would be split in two—into a section of those who had all been originally Jews, and into a section the great majority of whom had been originally Gentiles; and the Jewish section would hardly have recognized the other as being truly Christian. Had the split ever taken place, Paul, though born a Jew, would undoubtedly have cast in his lot with the latter, largely Gentile group. However, almost entirely through his efforts, the split never occurred, and the early church learned to accept Gentiles with Jews as equal members of their community; but for many years the possibility of a split remained and Paul vigorously defended the acceptance of non-Jews into the Christian church. As we shall see when we read through his letter to the Romans, this dispute colours and largely shapes what he writes. Unlike Jesus' first disciples who had all been ordinary men and women, Paul brought to the discussion a mind trained in all the intricacies of Jewish law. He grasped that if the law, the Jewish way of life and the Old Testament were properly understood, then the way was indicated in them for the introduction of Gentiles into the church. So arguing, he was led to a much deeper understanding of the very nature of what being a Christian meant.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROMANS

*Paul as Missionary and Letter-writer*

## PAUL AS MISSIONARY AND LETTER-WRITER

But Paul was not primarily a controversialist arguing the principle that Gentiles should be admitted into the church on equal terms with Jews; he was above all concerned to see that they actually came in. So he travelled widely, preaching to Jews and Gentiles that Jesus was both the Jewish Messiah and the deliverer for the whole world. His travels took him round the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean and he founded churches in many of them, e.g. Corinth, Ephesus. Normally he began his work by going to the Jewish community in the town to which he had come. Since he was a fellow Jew and a trained Rabbi they would give him a hearing; but when, as almost invariably happened, they as a group rejected his argument that Jesus who had been crucified was their Messiah, he would widen his preaching to take in the Gentiles. Thus a Christian community would come into existence in each town, containing a number of Jewish Christians but largely Gentile in its make-up. He moved from place to place, staying as long as it took him to establish the community on sound foundations or until persecution excluded him.

When, moreover, he had established one church and moved on to work in another area, he did not forget the first community. Many of the letters which he wrote were sent back to these young churches, to help them deal with their difficulties and to bring them to a fuller understanding of the Gospel he had preached to them, so that they should live by it more truly. However the letter that we are about to read was written to a church which he had neither founded nor visited.

Many scholars doubt if Paul wrote all the letters which bear his name in our New Testament. In many editions the letter to the Hebrews is attributed to Paul, but there are no scholars today who hold that Paul wrote this letter; it is not attributed to him in the New English Bible. However there is no doubt that he wrote Romans. Indeed Romans, with the two letters to the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul as Missionary and Letter-writer*

ROMANS

Corinthian church and the letter to the Galatians, are used as the touchstone by which the others are judged to see if they reveal the same mind behind them.

## THE CHURCH IN ROME

The letter is addressed to the Christians in Rome. Paul did not establish this church; no one today knows how it came into existence. There were other Christian missionaries as well as Paul who were active in founding churches, but it is very probable that if the church at Rome had been founded by some such leader Paul would have referred to him in the letter; he does not do this. Sometimes it is said that it was founded by Peter, one of the original disciples of Jesus; but there is nothing in the New Testament that suggests that Peter had ever been in Rome in the period before Paul wrote the letter, and there is a great deal of evidence to show that Peter was a leader of the church in Palestine until at least shortly before its writing and long after the beginning of Christianity in Rome. A long-standing and probably true tradition does hold that Peter and Paul both suffered martyrdom in Rome; so Peter must have come to Rome after this letter was written.

How, then, did the Roman church begin? The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54) expelled the Jews from Rome about A.D. 50 in consequence of rioting over a man named Chrestus. Suetonius, or the reports on which he depended, probably got the name wrong and the rioting was over Christus, i.e. Christ. Some Jews must have been attacking those who were advocating the claims of Jesus to be the Christ or Messiah. Acts 18: 1–2 tells us about two Jewish Christians, Aquila and his wife Priscilla, who had been forced to leave Rome when the Emperor expelled the Jews. When Nero became Emperor the Jews were allowed to return to the city (A.D. 54); presumably the Jewish Christians returned then also. It is not known whether Gentile Christians had also been forced to leave. The church must thus have been in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ROMANS

*The Church in Rome*

existence for a few years before Paul wrote. Since Rome was the capital of the ancient world there was a continual flow of people into and out of it on public and private business. Its large Jewish colony would have continually been in touch with Palestine, and Jewish Christians who travelled to Rome would naturally have begun to tell their fellow Jews that the Messiah had come and was Jesus. A Christian community thus established would have grown as other Christians whose business brought them to Rome joined it. If it began in the Jewish colony in Rome it certainly was not limited to Jews; the very fact that in the letter Paul deals with the relationship of Jewish and Gentile Christians shows that it was a church that contained both.

Though at the time of writing Paul has not yet visited Rome, he is hoping to come. He plans to stay a short time and then to go on farther west into areas like Spain where the Gospel has not yet been preached (15:23); for this journey Rome would be his natural base of operations. However, before he comes he intends to go to Jerusalem with a collection of money which he has gathered in his churches for the poor of the Christian community in that city (15:25). Though Paul eventually came to Rome, it was not in the way he planned. When he arrived in Jerusalem he was arrested and falsely accused of stirring up trouble; to escape his enemies he was forced to exercise his rights as a Roman citizen by appealing to the Emperor in Rome. To that city his case was then transferred and he himself sent as a prisoner. The story is told in Acts 21-28.

## PAUL'S REASON FOR WRITING

It was in order to prepare the way for the visit he planned that Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome. As we have seen, the early church was almost split by the controversy over the admission of Gentiles; in the controversy Paul himself had been the chief protagonist on behalf of the Gentiles. The church at Rome consisted of both Jews and Gentiles; misleading reports of the views that Paul held may well have been circulating;

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Paul's Reason for Writing*

ROMANS

Paul therefore writes to prepare them for his visit by setting down clearly what he believes to be the truth in the matter. He had already done this at least once before, in his letter to the Galatians. That letter had, however, been written in the full heat of the controversy when no one could have predicted in what way it would end. By the time of Romans it is quite clear that Paul's view had triumphed; almost everywhere Gentile Christians are being accepted into the church on the same terms as Jewish Christians and are not expected to take on themselves obedience to the ceremonial requirements of the Jewish law—the principal requirement was circumcision. With victory practically attained, Paul now sets down in a more reflective manner the underlying principles which led him to contest the issue.

We do not have in this letter a full and rounded exposition of what Paul took Christianity to be. There are many things which he merely mentions in passing, e.g. baptism (6: 1–11), assuming that his Roman readers will already know what needs to be known (and what was common knowledge in the early church) about this rite of admission to the church. There are matters on which he does not touch at all; the fact that he does not mention the Lord's Supper should not lead us to believe that it was not celebrated in Rome. In any letter there are always many things which the writer and the reader to whom it is initially addressed will have in common, and for that reason the writer does not explicitly mention them. He may allude to them in passing; when an outsider comes on the letter, this makes it difficult to understand; that is why Paul's meaning sometimes escapes us. Because this is a genuine letter and not a theological treatise it is not a comprehensive account of the nature of Christianity.

Yet because Paul is dealing with an issue of great importance he is compelled to delve to the very heart of Christianity to find a full and satisfying answer. He had the kind of mind that was never satisfied with superficialities; had he been dealing with another question of equal importance he would doubtless have

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## ROMANS

*Paul's Reason for Writing*

written an entirely different letter, but he would still have dealt with the fundamentals of Christian faith. In this letter, then, we see the greatest of Christian thinkers taking up a particular problem and, in explaining it, laying bare what Christianity is. Paul's letter is not the purest expression of his—or anybody's—Christianity, but its expression when faced with a particular problem: who can be members of the Christian church and on what conditions? As he works this out, we shall see that much emerges which is very relevant for everyone who wants to know what Christianity is or who seeks to live a Christian life. Because of this the letter has continually stimulated the thought of Christians. This was especially true at the time of the Reformation when Luther, Calvin, and the other leaders of Protestantism drew much of their inspiration from it. If at that time the interpretation of Romans was strongly contested between Roman Catholics and Protestants, it is true that today they are drawing much closer to a common understanding of it.

Paul wrote this letter when he was in Corinth, or shortly after he had left it on his way to Jerusalem with the collection (Acts 20: 1–3). He had come to Corinth where there had been some dispute about his authority; this had been settled, and he remained for some months until the money had arrived from other churches to be taken to Jerusalem. It is impossible to be certain of the absolute date because Paul's letter contains no reference to the major events in the history of the Roman Empire which can be precisely dated: it must however have been written in the period A.D. 55–9. Paul was now fairly sure of his future plans and since he hoped the Roman Church would play a considerable part in them, he writes to the Christians there introducing himself to them.

\* \* \* \* \*



Cambridge University Press  
 978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans  
 Ernest Best  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

*The Gospel according to Paul*

ROM. I: 1-7

## *The Gospel according to Paul*

PAUL INTRODUCES HIMSELF

FROM PAUL, servant of Christ Jesus, apostle by God's 1  
 call, set apart for the service of the Gospel.

This gospel God announced beforehand in sacred scrip- 2  
 tures through his prophets. It is about his Son: on the 3  
 human level he was born of David's stock, but on the level 4  
 of the spirit—the Holy Spirit—he was declared Son of  
 God by a mighty act in that he rose from the dead: it  
 is about Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him I received the 5  
 privilege of a commission in his name to lead to faith and  
 obedience men in all nations, yourselves among them, you 6  
 who have heard the call and belong to Jesus Christ.

I send greetings to all of you in Rome whom God loves 7  
 and has called to be his dedicated people. Grace and peace  
 to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

\* In Paul's day, letters began with the sender's name, followed  
 by that of the person or persons to whom it was sent and a greet-  
 ing: *A to B, Greetings*. Each part of this formula might be ex-  
 panded if the writer wished. In our passage, verse 1 corresponds  
 to *A* and verse 7 to *B* and the greeting. Verses 2-6 are an expan-  
 sion of *A*. Since Paul was unknown in person to most of the  
 Christians in Rome he introduces himself, carefully explaining  
 in verses 1 and 5 his authority and in 2-4 showing that the  
 Gospel he preaches is the same as the Gospel they already know.

1. *Servant*, or 'slave', may be used of every Christian, because  
 he serves Jesus; *apostle* is reserved for a few. The latter word is  
 used both in a narrow sense of the twelve disciples of Jesus and  
 in a wider sense of all who are 'sent' (this is the literal meaning of  
 the word) by Jesus to proclaim the Gospel. Paul uses it here in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-09401-6 - The Letter of Paul to the Romans

Ernest Best

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ROM. I: 1-7

*The Gospel according to Paul*

the narrower sense; he had not been a disciple of the earthly Jesus but claims an equality with the original twelve disciples because he has been *set apart for the service of the Gospel*. Elsewhere he argues that he is 'an apostle, not by human appointment or human commission, but by commission from Jesus Christ and from God the Father' (Gal. 1:1); he is such in order that he 'might proclaim' Christ 'among the Gentiles' (Gal. 1:15-16). His commission was recognized by the original apostles who acknowledged that he 'had been entrusted with the Gospel for Gentiles as surely as Peter had been entrusted with the Gospel for Jews' (Gal. 2:7). Thus Paul's authority to address the Roman Christians is that of an *apostle* like one of the twelve chosen by Jesus, and his special sphere of responsibility is the Gentiles, i.e. non-Jews. Paul is throughout conscious of God's call to this (cf. verse 5), and therein he resembles many of the prophets of the Old Testament, e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah; they too thought of themselves as the 'servants' of God.

2. *sacred scriptures*: if Paul thinks and feels like a prophet of the Old Testament it is not surprising that he sees his *gospel* (literally, 'good news') as a continuance and fulfilment of the message of the Old Testament. The relationship of the new thing that has happened in Jesus to the older story of the Old Testament is one of the themes of the letter. Since some of his readers may have heard that Paul is a revolutionary who thinks all the teaching of the Old Testament unimportant, he seeks now to disarm them, claiming to base his teaching on the Old Testament itself.

3-4. From the very first, Christians would have been forced to say what the centre of their belief was, both as an acknowledgement of their own acceptance of it when they were being baptized and in order to be able to explain it to others. Thus brief creeds or confessions grew up. Paul now takes up one of these which would have been known to his correspondents. There are two elements in this brief statement: the first connects Jesus to the Royal House of *David*, of which the Jews expected their Messiah to be a descendant; the second pro-