



ETB: Romans 12:1-18

WHY

PAUL WROTE

ROMANS

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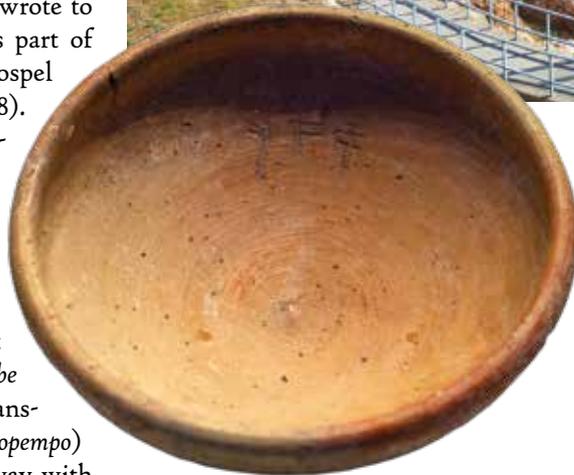
BY CECIL R. TAYLOR

WHY DID PAUL WRITE Romans? For many Christians the answer is simple. The Spirit led him to pen it. Beyond this, the letter itself indicates three explicit purposes for Paul writing to the Roman Christians.¹ First, he wrote to tell of his impending visit. Paul had long wanted to get to the empire's capital, but something had prevented his coming (Rom. 1:13). Now that he expected to arrive in the near future (15:22-28), his telling them was appropriate. Second, he wrote to let them know his visit was part of a much larger plan for a gospel mission to Spain (vv. 24,28). His work in the East completed (vv. 19,23), Paul was headed to the western Mediterranean. During his stay in Rome, Paul hoped to create interest in that mission and secure their support for it (v. 24). Paul's phrase "to be assisted...for my journey"² translates a single Greek word (*propempe*) that means to "help on the way with material support."³ Third, Paul wrote to ask them to pray for two specific concerns (vv. 30-32). First, before he could make the trip westward he had to deliver a collection from Gentile churches to the Jerusalem congregation (vv. 26-28). Fierce enemies lurked there. So he asked the Roman believers to pray that God would rescue him from any dangers that might await him in Judea. Second, he asked them to pray that the Jerusalem congregation would accept the love gift as graciously as the Gentile churches had offered it. Those prayers on his behalf answered, Paul could come to Rome with joy for a time of spiritual refreshment.

To see how this trio of purposes connects to the material in the body of the letter can be difficult.⁴ What role,



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Left: From Beth-shemesh, 8th cent. BC; although this terra-cotta piece resembles a bowl, archaeologist have determined it is actually the oldest-known poor box. It is inscribed with the Hebrew word for "your brother."

Above: Roman amphitheater at Tarragona in northeastern Spain; according to early Christian tradition, Paul preached in Tarragona in AD 58 and the city afterward became the hub for Christianity in Spain.

if any, did Paul's current circumstances or those of the Roman church(es), play in determining the apostle's comments? Having mentioned the gospel in 1:16, did Paul feel compelled to explain it in full for these people because most of them did not know him personally? Did false accusations (e.g. 3:8) move Paul to defend himself? How much did Paul know about problems in the Roman church? Did the threat of false teachers (16:17-20) prompt his letter? Was it the issues addressed in chapters 9-11? Or perhaps the divisions between "strong" and "weak" (14:1-15:13)? These questions beg answers and provoke serious students to search further for Paul's purpose(s) in writing this letter.

Paul said he wrote Romans in some points "by way of reminder"

(15:15, ESV), but this statement is far too general to give guidance about a potential purpose. He never said what those points were. And at least part of his purpose was to introduce Phoebe of Cenchrea (a port of Corinth) to the church at Rome (16:1-2)

More definite proposals are available. It may help to organize the possibilities into groups: those that focus on locations central to Paul's concern, those that center on problems in the church at Rome,⁵ and some of a miscellaneous nature.

Locations

Spain—Clearly Paul wanted the Roman believers to sponsor his mission to Spain. So with this letter he meant to assure them he was thoroughly orthodox in doctrine and

worthy of their support. If, however, this was Paul's purpose in producing the letter, surely he would have mentioned Spain before chapter 15. Also he should have addressed additional key theological issues in defending his gospel.⁶

Galatia and Corinth—In both places Paul fought intense battles with Judaizers who insisted that no Gentile could accept the Jewish Messiah without first becoming a Jewish proselyte, accepting circumcision, and taking on the yoke of the law. The struggles resolved, maybe Paul decided to put into a letter his settled views on the matters. This, however, leaves open the question of why he sent the letter to Rome. Nor does this explain why Paul emphasized his oft-frustrated desire to visit the capital of the empire. Surely the letter had something to do with this desire.⁷

Jerusalem—Paul was on his way to the holy city with a collection for the mother church. Perhaps Romans contains material for a speech he planned to give upon his arrival to the Christian community, which was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. If he could clear up misunderstandings about his theology with Jewish believers in Rome it might help his relationship with the Jerusalem congregation(s). This view does not explain, however, his repeated desire to visit Rome.⁸

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Problems

Division—Romans 14:1–15:13 shows a rift in the Christian community in Rome between Jewish and Gentile Christians. The material in chapters 1–11 provided the theological foundation for Paul's call for unity; and chapters 12–13 set up an ethical basis, which he began with, "Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship" (12:1, CSB). So Paul wrote to tell "the strong," probably Gentile Christians, not to scorn things Jewish and also to tell those who are "weak in the faith" (14:1, CSB), probably Jewish Christians, not to bind everyone to diets and days.⁹ But if healing divisions was the point, why did he wait until chapters 14–15 to apply his theology? And it is not certain that "strong" and "weak" refer to Gentile and Jewish believers respectively rather than individual believers on different spiritual levels.¹⁰ Unity was important because division could derail their support for his Spanish campaign.¹¹

Paul's reputation—The apostle's disagreements with the Judaizers, those who insisted that Christians had to adopt Jewish traditions, had caused some to see Paul as "anti-law"

and "anti-Jewish." He may have written in order to "defuse these rumors and perhaps even win over some [Roman believers] who were already hostile toward him."¹²

Miscellaneous

Through the years scholars and theologians have attempted to understand why Paul wrote the Book of Romans. While each possibility has merit, each also comes with inherent weaknesses.

Theology—This is the traditional purpose assigned to the Book of Romans—for Paul to articulate his theology. Having preached for twenty plus years, Paul had developed a mature grasp of the gospel. The time was ripe for him to make a full statement of his deepest convictions. Romans is nearest to a systematic theology that Paul ever produced. But this view does not explain why he wrote this letter or why he sent it to Rome. It fails to account for specific references to Rome, for personal allusions (e.g. 1:7–15) and greetings (16:1–23), and for his

Below: Part of the Chester Beatty collection of biblical papyri; the

text is Romans 12:11–13:1

Lower left: One of the individuals Paul mentioned in his letter to the Roman believers was Phoebe. She lived in Cencreae, which was the port city for Corinth. The ruins of the city, now mostly submerged, include a temple to Isis, an early Christian church, fish tanks, and a sanctuary honoring Aphrodite. Extensive earthquakes at the end of the 4th cent. AD destroyed many structures. Although the citizens rebuilt, the site was eventually abandoned in the 6th cent.

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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (12018/1090)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (12/7/3)

Above: Overlooking the Roman Forum; in the foreground, the three columns are remains from the Temple of Castor and Pollux; the triple arch in the center is the Arch of Septimius Severus, which celebrates the Romans' victory over the Parthians.

As great numbers of people began to respond positively, jealousy caused some Jews to respond negatively. This was a turning point after which Paul began to focus his evangelistic work toward the Gentiles. The Judiazers insisted that no Gentile could come to Christ without first embracing Jewish tradition, a teaching that Paul emphatically opposed.

Left: At Antioch facing Pisidia. Many Jews at Antioch received Paul's gospel message.

sketchy treatment of some important doctrines, such as last things, the church, and cosmic redemption.¹³

Ecclesiastical—In this view Paul's central aim was to show that all believers benefit from the promises made to Abraham and, by faith, to become the people of God. No one can talk about salvation by grace through faith without talking about the church. The view breaks down, however, on the fact that the word "church" (Greek, *ecclesia*) occurs in Romans only in chapter 16.

When the experts disagree, it is impossible to pick the purpose for

Paul's writing Romans. Evidently Paul had several purposes in mind for the letter.

Conclusion

How does the focal passage (12:1-18) fit into the flow of Romans? Interpreters must not gloss over chapters 12-13 as general ethical guidance unrelated to any issue(s) specific to Rome. Since Paul already knew the division within the Roman church, it is more natural to see 12:1-18, and the rest of chapters 12-13, as ethical guidance rising from the known conflict in that community and leading to chapters 14-15.¹⁴ ☘

1. See C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1981), 2:815-16.
2. From Romans 15:24, CSB, emphasis added.
3. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 17.
4. See Cranfield, *Romans*, 1:22-24.
5. See Moo, *Romans*, 17-21.
6. *Ibid.*, 17.
7. *Ibid.*, 17-18.
8. *Ibid.*, 18.
9. *Ibid.*, 19.
10. Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 14.
11. Robert H. Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 395.
12. Moo, *Romans*, 21.
13. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, rev. ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1970), 398.
14. D.A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 406.

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