

## READING PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

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READING PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS

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*Edited by*  
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Society of Biblical Literature  
Atlanta

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For John Baxter and James Smeal

Together we read Romans for ourselves for the first time



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## ABBREVIATIONS

### PRIMARY SOURCES

1 Clem.	1 Clement
1 <i>Apol.</i>	Justin, <i>Apologia i</i>
1 En.	1 Enoch (Ethiopic Apocalypse)
2 Bar.	2 Baruch (Syriac Apocalypse)
A.J.	Josephus, <i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
<i>Ann.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Annales</i>
Apoc. Mos.	Apocalypse of Moses
<i>Apol.</i>	Tertullian, <i>Apologeticus</i>
<i>Ars.</i>	Ovid, <i>Ars amatoria</i>
B.J.	Josephus, <i>Bellum judaicum</i>
C. Ap.	Josephus, <i>Contra Apionem</i>
Civ.	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i>
<i>Claud.</i>	Suetonius, <i>Divus Claudius</i>
<i>Conf.</i>	Augustine, <i>Confessionum libri XIII</i>
<i>Ep.</i>	Pliny, <i>Epistulae</i> ; or Seneca, <i>Epistulae morales</i>
<i>Epigr.</i>	Martial, <i>Epigrammata</i>
<i>Hist.</i>	Tacitus, <i>Historiae</i>
<i>Hist. adv.</i>	Orosius, <i>Historiarum Adversum Paganos</i>
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Hist. rom.</i>	Dio Cassius, <i>Historia romana</i>
<i>Hypoth.</i>	Philo, <i>Hypothetica</i>
<i>Ign. Phld.</i>	Ignatius, <i>To the Philadelphians</i>
<i>Inst.</i>	Lactantius, <i>Divinarum institutionum libri VII</i>
Jub.	Jubilees
L.A.E.	Life of Adam and Eve
<i>Nat.</i>	Tertullian, <i>Ad nationes</i>
<i>Sat.</i>	Horace, <i>Satirae</i> ; Juvenal, <i>Satirae</i> ; or Persius, <i>Satirae</i>
[ <i>Subl.</i> ]	Longinus, <i>De sublimitate</i>

*Superst.* Plutarch, *De superstitione*  
*Tib.* Suetonius, *Tiberius*

## SECONDARY SOURCES

AB Anchor Bible  
 AcadBib Academia Biblica  
 ANTC Abingdon New Testament Commentaries  
 BDAG Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.  
 BECNT Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament  
 BZNW Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft  
 CBET Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology  
 CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*  
 ConBNT Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series  
 CSEL Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum  
 CurBS *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies*  
 EC *Early Christianity*  
 HBT *Horizons in Biblical Theology*  
 Herm Hermeneia  
 HTR *Harvard Theological Review*  
 IBT Interpreting Biblical Texts  
 ICC International Critical Commentary  
 JBL *Journal of Biblical Literature*  
 JSNT *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*  
 JSNTSup Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series  
 KEK Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament (Meyer-Kommentar)  
 LCC Library of Christian Classics  
 LNTS Library of New Testament Studies  
 NIB *New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004.  
 NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament

NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
NPNF1	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1</i>
NPNF2	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTR	New Testament Readings
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
PCC	Paul in Critical Contexts
PCNT	Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament
RefR	<i>Reformed Review</i>
RGRW	Religions in the Graeco-Roman World
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SCJR	<i>Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations</i>
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
TSAJ	Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WBComp	Westminster Bible Companion
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament



## READING THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

*Jerry L. Sumney*

Romans has been one of the most influential books of the New Testament. It was a text from Romans that moved St. Augustine to become a Christian. Martin Luther's reading of Romans led him to start the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin's reading led him to propose his doctrine of the predestination of all people. John Wesley's foundational experience came to him while hearing a reading of the preface of Luther's commentary on Romans. In scholarship of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Romans exercised more influence on the ways Paul and his theology were understood than any other letter, possibly more than all the other letters combined. Interpreters consciously outlined Paul's theology by following the themes of Romans. Only in the last two decades of the twentieth century did New Testament scholars begin to seriously question the wisdom of relying on Romans so heavily. Still, many leading scholars look to it as their starting point for understanding Paul.

Traditionally Romans has been thought of as the place where Paul sets out his theology systematically. Other letters have their content determined by problems in the church to which Paul is writing or some other element of the letter's occasion. But in Romans, it was said, Paul is free to say what he thinks without responding to specific problems. Thus, if you wanted to know what Paul really thought or if you wanted to describe Paul's theology, you should start with and focus on Romans. The last decades of the twentieth century saw interpreters begin to question this assumption and to question the primacy of Romans in understanding Paul's theology.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Especially influential in shifting attention to the theology of other Pauline letters was J. Christiaan Beker's *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). He set out a method for thinking about the letters and the theology in them that did not require interpreters to start with the theology of any

Scholars have increasingly recognized that Romans is not a text of systematic theology with no immediate context shaping the way Paul talked about the issues. In fact, some theological issues that are important to Paul are not even mentioned in Romans (for example, the Lord's Supper). Still, Romans is not only the longest of Paul's extant letters, it is also the one that provides the fullest explication of what he teaches on a range of issues—including why people need the gospel and how God addresses that need in Christ. As we will see, however, this exposition of his teaching is shaped by specific things he needs to accomplish with the letter. As a result, many interpreters now draw on Romans more carefully than some who have simply used it as an outline of Paul's theology.

Paul seems to have three related purposes in mind as he writes Romans. The first relates to his immediate travel plans. Paul writes Romans from Corinth. He has just completed a round of visits to congregations he had established earlier to take up a collection to deliver to the church in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem church, and perhaps the region as a whole, had experienced some significant financial problems. Paul had asked his churches to contribute to a fund designed to bring aid to the Jerusalem church. Paul envisioned this offering as more than a good deed designed to help the poor. As he saw it, this was an opportunity for his predominantly Gentile churches to acknowledge their spiritual debt to and connection with the churches that had a predominantly Jewish membership. Tensions between these churches had been high, so high that Paul is afraid they will split and refuse to acknowledge the legitimacy of one another. He even fears that the Jerusalem church will not accept the gift he is bringing from his churches.

Paul thinks that having the predominantly Gentile churches make this gesture and provide this relief will calm the tensions. When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, then, he wants to be able to represent all the churches that have a large Gentile population. As you will see in the essays by Mark Nanos and Andrew Das, there is significant disagreement among scholars about the ethnic composition of the church in Rome and about its relationship to the Jewish community there. Most interpreters acknowledge, however, that one reason Paul writes Romans is to be able to include the churches of the city of Rome among those he represents as he goes to Jerusalem.

Paul's problem with claiming to represent the Roman churches is that

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one letter. The subsequent work of the "Pauline Theology Group" of the Society of Biblical Literature furthered this work substantively. Much of the work of that group can be found in the four volumes entitled *Pauline Theology*.

he had never visited Rome as a missionary and so was not the founder of its churches. It is possible, though by no means certain, that the people who founded the Roman church were related to Paul's missionary team. Whether that is the case or not, he needs more contact with the churches in Rome to include them among those he represents in Jerusalem. So as he writes Romans, he needs to introduce himself, his apostleship (and so his authority), and his teaching in a way that will move the Roman church to consider him their apostle.

Second, Paul wants the churches there to sponsor a new missionary endeavor. He tells them that after his trip to Jerusalem he wants to begin a new mission in Spain. He has spent his time as a missionary and apostle in areas east of Italy, mostly in Asia Minor (today's Turkey) and Greece. Now he intends to turn west. He seems to want at least the financial support of the church in Rome, and perhaps more. He may need a guide or translator; he does not specify how he wants to be "sent on by you" (15:24). Paul tells about this travel itinerary and his reasons for it in Rom 15:22–33.

While Paul writes to introduce himself as an apostle and to claim them for inclusion with the collection, he also gives advice about problems in the Roman church. This seems particularly bold since he is trying to win them over. Still, Rom 14–15 deal with questions about religious dietary and calendrical regulations. It seems that at least some of these questions stem from differences in the ways church members think believers should observe the Mosaic law, but other questions are not so clearly related to that issue. Interpreters are divided over how much of the dispute revolves around Torah observance and how much around other questions. More broadly, Paul also takes up the topic of relations between Jews who are not in the church and Gentiles in the church and between Christ-confessing Jews and Christ-confessing Gentiles.

Romans was delivered to the Roman church by a woman named Phoebe. This is the reason Paul commends her to the Romans in 16:1–2. She was a deacon of the church in Cenchreae, a port of the city of Corinth. Having Phoebe deliver the letter and mentioning that he has gone through that region is how we know Paul is in Corinth when he writes Romans. The date of its writing is around 57. This is the last letter Paul writes as a free person. He will be arrested in Jerusalem and probably never be out of prison again.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Interpreters who think Paul wrote the Pastoral Epistles often assert that Paul

There is much that you can learn from studying Romans from many perspectives and using many methodologies. Our knowledge of the early church is enhanced by many things in Romans. We find information about non-Pauline churches outside of Palestine, about the varying social statuses of members of the church, and about the church's relationship with the Roman Empire. All of these and more are legitimate and important goals for studying Romans, and knowledge of all of them is needed to understand Romans. The purpose of the essays in this book is to help readers understand this letter. Since Romans is a religious document intended to argue for particular religious and theological views, the focus of this volume is on its theology. Other kinds of issues are raised because of the ways the positions taken on them influence how we understand the message and theology of the letter. Such study contributes to our understanding of the beliefs and practices of Pauline and Roman Christianity in the middle of the first century.

The first two essays of this book (those mentioned above by Nanos and Das) discuss the identity of the recipients of Romans and the relationship of their church to the synagogue. What you conclude about this question influences how you understand some theological matters and some other issues about the letter as a whole. The next essay draws attention to the ways some interpreters see political elements in the letter's language and theology. How the church understood itself in relation to the Roman Empire and how its language may reflect and oppose the empire's claims may also influence how we hear this letter. Sylvia Keesmaat's essay reflects the attention that has been given to this aspect of the context of Paul's letters and their recipients. She shows how significantly this way of viewing Romans can shift our understanding of its message.

The other essays each take up a theological theme that is important in Romans. The sequence roughly follows the sequence of the way these subjects become dominant in the flow of the letter's argument. There are two essays on the question of the place of Israel in God's plan, the topic that dominates Rom 9–11. What Paul says about this issue, like the question of

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was released in Rome and then returned to the Aegean area rather than going on to Spain. They contend that he wrote those letters before he was arrested and sent to Rome a second time. In this view Paul was executed at the end of this second Roman imprisonment. The vast majority of critical scholars, however, reject that reconstruction and argue that Paul did not write the Pastorals and was never released from prison after his arrest in Jerusalem.



the identity of the recipients of the letter, has been understood in radically different ways. Both essays here reject the view that God's covenant with Israel has been concluded. They differ in the ways they see God remaining in covenant with Israel.

Each essay in the book begins with a brief account of the range of views taken on the topic it treats. The authors then present their own understanding of that issue, indicating why they think this represents the best interpretation. The authors do not represent a single perspective on the letter. The differences among them are intended to help readers think about the implications each issue has for our reading of the whole. Having these competing readings will, I hope, help you sharpen your own understanding as you see the strengths and weakness of the various positions taken.

Interpreters agree that Paul provides a thematic statement for the whole of Romans in 1:16–17. These verses read, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for all who have faith, for Jews first and also Greeks. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith. Just as it is written, ‘The just will live by faith’” (author's translation).

These verses are packed with import as Paul hints at many things he will discuss in the rest of the letter. We will point to some of those topics here as preparation for the essays that follow. First, we might note that the gospel is a manifestation of the power of God, not Christ. This suggests that the work of Christ, as Paul sees it, is to demonstrate and make present the power of God. God remains the source of the gospel, with Christ as the one through whom that source is active.

This thematic statement also assumes that everyone (Jews and Gentiles) need the gospel. While Paul does not say why that is the case in these verses, he spends all of 1:18–3:20 demonstrating that everyone does need it. He first explains why Gentiles need it, and then he turns to show that Jews also need it, even though they already had the law and are in a covenant relationship with God.

There are extensive discussions about the meaning of the word “faith” in Romans and in all of Paul's use of it. As we think about the meaning of this word, it may help to think about English words that have many meanings. Consider the word “set.” It might be a noun or a verb. As a verb it means, among other things, to put something down or to prepare a trap; as a noun it might refer to a group of China dishes or a certain amount of tennis. It might even refer to a predetermined length of time, a set amount

of time. This is just a small sample of the meanings for this small word that you find in a dictionary. Just as “set” has many and different meanings, so do many Greek words. The Greek word usually translated “faith” is *pistis*, and the verb form (or cognate) is *pisteuō*, often translated “to have faith” or “to believe.” But *pistis* has a wide range of meanings that include faith, faithfulness, and trustworthiness.

Scholars continue to disagree about the meaning of *pistis* in various places in Romans, including in these opening verses. In this place, though not in all, I think the word means “faithfulness.” Thus, the middle sentence of verses 16–17 says that God’s righteousness is revealed “through faithfulness for faithfulness.” That may seem no clearer than the previous translation, but the rest of Romans helps us fill out the meaning. The first reference to faithfulness refers to the faithfulness of Christ; that is, to the faithfulness to God and God’s will that we see in Christ’s willingness to do God’s will through his ministry, cross, and resurrection. This life and death of faithfulness then creates faithfulness in those who hear the message about it. So the phrase means that God’s righteousness is revealed through the faithfulness of Christ and his faithfulness produces faithfulness in others.<sup>3</sup> The essay by Katherine Grieb explores what Paul means when he talks about God’s righteousness and how it comes to expression in the work of Christ. Joel Green then explores the various images Paul uses to describe how the work of Christ gives expression to God’s righteousness.

Paul says in 1:17 (and expands on that expression in 3:21) that the Scriptures of Israel speak of this revelation of God’s righteousness. Paul uses the Scriptures to interpret what has happened through Christ, more than he sees them as predictions of some sort. His mention of Scripture here signals a clear connection between God’s presence and acts among the Israelites and what God does through Christ. This raises important issues that Paul must address throughout Romans. The essay of Francis Watson discusses the way Paul sees the law’s place in the church. This was a central issue in the life of the first-century church, an issue that would determine the course of the church’s history. Watson argues that Paul contends that faith in Christ rather than Torah observance should be the central identity marker for church members. Rodrigo Morales takes up the

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3. Other interpreters argue that “from faithfulness to faithfulness” means that the faithfulness of God leads to the faithfulness of Christ. This interpretation, even more powerfully than the one offered in the text, maintains a focus on God as the actor in salvation, in the gospel.

issue of the way Paul uses Scripture in Romans. Scholars disagree about how much Paul takes into account the original context of the verses he quotes from the Hebrew Bible. Many think he pays little attention to that context, others argue that he is very careful about reflecting that original meaning in his use of a passage. Morales sets out this dispute more fully and then discusses Paul's use of Scripture as one who is convinced Paul does draw on the original context of that earlier writing.

Paul sees the gospel as a new revelation of God's righteousness. This means that the gospel is an eschatological event; that is, it is an end-time happening. Paul saw the coming of Christ as an event that initiated the end of all things. Through Christ, God's purposes for the world were finally being accomplished. Yet it was clear that the will of God was not yet being done. So while the end-time had begun, he looked forward to the conclusion of the end-times. In the course of Romans, he compares Christ to Adam. Just as Adam was the first human of the previous time, so Christ is the first person of the end-time. James Dunn's essay explores Paul's understanding of what it means to set Christ in an eschatological context in such a way that you can speak of him as a "second Adam." Ann Jervis continues the exploration of the eschatological nature of the gospel by discussing what Paul says in Romans about the presence of the Spirit in the lives of believers. Paul thinks that having God's presence in one's life is an end-time gift of God. Jervis describes what Paul says this presence of the Spirit means in the present for believers' lives.

Our thematic verses in chapter 1 have another curious turn of phrase. Verse 16 says salvation is for all, Jews first. For non-Jewish readers, then and now, this seems startling. Rather than having all people be completely equal in every way, this phrase gives priority to Jews. The essays of Elizabeth Johnson and Caroline Johnson Hodge draw out ways to understand what Paul says about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles within the church, as well as the relationship between the church and the earlier covenant between God and Israel. They focus on what Paul says in the difficult section that makes up chapters 9–11 of Romans.

Chapters 12–15 deal with how the believers in Rome should behave. We must not see this section as unrelated to previous parts of the letter. Paul's thematic statement in 1:16–17 also points to these chapters. Remember that *pistis*, the word usually translated "faith," sometimes also means faithfulness. If it means "faithfulness" there, then it certainly looks forward to this concluding explanation of what faithfulness looks like for the churches in Rome. Even if we understand *pistis* to mean "faith" or "trust"

in 1:16–17, it still includes a reference to how people conduct their lives. When Paul speaks of faith, he does not mean that a person simply holds to a particular set of beliefs. Faith for Paul is an orientation of life. It includes what people believe, but also encompasses their attitudes and behaviors toward others. For Paul, if a person does not live as they should, that is good evidence that he or she does not have faith—at least not what he calls faith. What you believe and how you live are inextricably linked for Paul. The essay by Victor Furnish will explore the connections between the way Paul talks about the gospel in the preceding chapters and the expectations for behavior that he sets out in chapters 12–15.

Some interpreters argue that chapter 16 of Romans was added at a later time. Not only does chapter 15 end with a doxology that makes an appropriate end for the letter, but some ancient manuscripts put the doxology that concludes chapter 16 at the end of chapter 15. In addition, Paul sends personal greetings to more people in chapter 16 than he greets in any other letter. This seems strange because he has never been to Rome. Despite these problems, the majority of interpreters think chapter 16 was a part of the original letter. They note that it is present in nearly every ancient manuscript of Romans, and it is not until after the fifth century that it is actually absent from a manuscript—a manuscript that is a Latin translation of the original Greek. Further, many interpreters also think that chapter 16 fits at least one purpose of the letter quite well. If Paul intends to claim these churches as his in Jerusalem or to gain their support for his mission to Spain, it will help in this initial contact to refer to people in Rome whom he knows, especially when they are leaders in their church. Knowing these people gives him some additional credibility. In the language of rhetoric, it helps him establish his ethos.

Careful study of chapter 16 can also reveal a good deal about the people who are in Paul's churches, since it seems that many people he has known from other places are now in Rome. Among the things we learn from chapter 16 is that women play a significant role in the leadership of Paul's churches and in Paul's missionary efforts. While Paul has a reputation for restricting the place of women, this chapter shows what prominent positions they held as leaders and as coworkers in his mission.

Romans is in many ways a tightly constructed argument. Its parts flow from one another and the later parts depend on what Paul thinks he has established in earlier parts. At the same time, the argument of the letter (that is, its train of thought) is often hard to follow. There are some contorted arguments in some places (see especially chapters 9–11) and in

others there seem to be leaps of logic that are difficult to follow. But working through the provocative and dense argumentation is worth the effort. At the end we see how Paul envisions the Christian message as something that affects and will eventually re-orient the entire cosmos. Simultaneously, he sees it as a message that currently reorients the believer's life, turning people to ways of living that make life more meaningful. Whether or not the reader is convinced by Paul's message, this letter sets out a grand vision. Interpretations of this vision, both good ones and inadequate ones, have been very influential in the development of Western culture. Identifying the roots of some of our understandings of ourselves as humans makes the study of Romans, then, an important undertaking.

#### FOR FURTHER READING

Bartlett, David L. *Romans*. WBComp. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995. Bartlett provides an accessible text that will help beginning interpreters gain understanding of the issues involved with interpreting Romans and so prepare them for further study. This text can also serve as a good beginning commentary for nonspecialists.

Johnson, Luke T. *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary*. New York: Crossroad, 1997. Johnson's accessible commentary gives special attention to the literary features of Romans. He also gives good attention to the theological issues raised throughout the letter.

Keck, Leander E. *Romans*. ANTC. Nashville: Abingdon, 2005. This excellent commentary brings the best of recent scholarship to a fairly wide range of readers. His attention to the theme of the righteousness of God and his careful, yet accessible, attention to difficult issues make this an outstanding resource for study of this letter.

Keck, Leander E., and Victor P. Furnish. *The Pauline Letters*. IBT. Nashville: Abingdon, 1984. This very introductory text covers all the Pauline letters. It provides a broad overview of issues and themes. Thus, it can serve as a good entrée into study of Romans.