

Romans 1

A Commentary on Romans 1

8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

The Jews had quite a long history of settlement at Rome, going back to at least 139 BC. We know this because, according to the Roman historian Valerius Maximus, in 139 BC *'the Jews had tried to corrupt Roman values with their cult of Jupiter Sabazius'*, and had therefore all been expelled. How long the Jews had been in Rome before that is not known. (Rome came into existence around 753 BC, and the first Greek colony in Italy was at Cumae, near Naples, in 600 BC.) A major influx of Jews then occurred in 63 BC when Pompey returned from his campaign in Judea with slaves. The Jewish community seemed to thrive, with lots of slaves in time being granted freedom, and becoming libertini. In AD 19 in the reign of Tiberius there were some more problems and another expulsion order was issued, although this time the order was limited to 4000 Jews, the remainder being asked to renounce their faith. According to Dio Cassius, the problem this time was the Jews were converting too many people. By AD 41 though Cassius tells there were once again a very large number of Jews in Rome.

Between AD 33 and AD 49 a church was established in Rome, perhaps as early as AD 33 by the Roman Jews returning from Pentecost; the bible does not tell us precisely when the Church was started or by whom, other than it was not Paul, and it was obviously a well established and very flourishing Church by AD 49. Paul says (Romans 15:23) that he had been wanting to visit the Church in Rome for 'polys etos', 'many years', but that his ministry to the gentiles had got in the way. This seems to imply that the Church was in existence at least in AD 37 when Paul started his ministry. We also have the fact that Paul mentions some of the Church members being converted before himself. Romans 16:7: *'Salute Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen, and my fellow-prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me'*. I suspect that the Church had been started in AD 33 by Jews returning from the Pentecost.

According to the Roman historian Suetonius, the emperor Claudius issued a decree in AD 49 that expelled all Jews from Rome. Acts 18 corroborates this, a reference is made to Paul meeting with Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth, who were in Corinth "because that Claudius had commanded all Jews to depart from Rome". Suetonius records that the AD 49 expulsion came about *"because they (the Jews) were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus."* As the historical records provide scant information, we are left to fill in the blanks. The most likely scenario is that the burgeoning church and the unbelieving Jews came into conflict. There were several synagogues in Rome, and most likely as the new church took root, and converts started leaving the synagogues, resentment grew, leading of course to the kinds of full scale mob disorder that we are familiar with

from the apostles' ministry. The Romans would not have been remotely interested in the whys and wherefores of the dispute, they would just have seen it as rioting, and thrown a blanket deportation order on all the Jews, Christians and non-Christians alike. The entire Jewish community, 40,000 - 50,000 people, were expelled in AD 49 according to the Roman historians, which begs the question of what proportion of them had at that point already converted to Christianity. Paul tells us here that their faith is now spoken of throughout the whole world, so I think can we conclude that a large number of the deportees were Christian Jews who were then scattered in exile throughout the entire Roman Empire. Deporting 50,000 people is actually quite a major logistics exercise. Maybe some were still slaves and were sold overseas. Maybe they just queued for boats out of Rome. Maybe it was hurried, maybe it took place over months. Who knows. What we do know is that around 50,000 Jews were expelled, and that enough of that 50,000 were Christians to spread the gospel throughout the Roman empire, indeed, throughout the whole world according to Paul. In this one verse, Paul appears here to be referring to a very significant event in the life of the Early Church, one which had a massive positive impact on the growth of Christianity. Claudius was not a Christian, but he most certainly appears to have done the Church a huge service.

There is actually more to the history of the Roman Church, insofar as it had very close ties to the Church in Britain, which is really a separate issue for another study. What is clear is that Paul had a very high regard for the Church in Rome, and we do not seem him upbraiding them in the way most of his epistles to the other churches centre around correcting apostasy; quite the contrary, he speaks of a 'mutual faith', and thanks God that this same faith has gone to the whole world. Their faith clearly had his stamp of approval. So, the nub of the matter is that in the fall out of the Claudian expulsion order, maybe as many as 50,000 Jews were expelled from Rome, a good portion of whom had already converted to Christianity, and they had, like blowing on a dandelion, been scattered all around the Roman Empire, where they were starting new churches, joining existing churches, and spreading the gospel. Nero who came to power in AD 54 apparently revoked the edict, so as Paul was writing in AD 57-58, we can surmise that by that time some or many of the expelled Jews had made their way back to the Church in Rome. [Of course, whilst the expulsion of the Jews gave rise to a great evangelistic wave around the world, it also meant that the remnant Church left in Rome for those 6 years had been entirely non-Jewish, which would undoubtedly at that time have made it quite unique.]

13 gentiles

The Greek here is 'ethnos' which means Nations. The world, in Hebrew thought, is Israel and the Nations. So Paul is addressing the Romans as one of the many nations.

14-15 I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; [In plain English, "I have an obligation both to the Greeks and the Barbarians"] both to the wise, and to the unwise —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

The language Paul uses here is very specific, and we need some background understanding of the

terms to fully understand him.

The term 'Barbarian' has had a variety of connotations over time, but it originated in Greek thought, and it meant a non-Greek, or somebody outside the Greek empire, and somebody who was illiterate, uncultured, and whose speech was unintelligible. In the Roman empire of Paul's day, it meant pretty much the same, either a non-Roman, or a non-Roman who was a citizen of the Empire, and a person with no education and culture. Paul uses the same term in Corinthians to indicate somebody who is unintelligible when they speak. As he qualifies the sentence with 'both to the wise (learned) and the unwise (unlearned)', he is making it totally unambiguous: he is referring to education and literacy here. The Greek is the educated literate person, and the Barbarian is the uneducated illiterate person. In fact Paul is making it doubly unambiguous, because he uses the term Greek rather than Roman where clearly Roman would be the normal word to use, as he was addressing a Roman audience. He is clearly telling us that the specific issue in view is literacy, education and culture, and he reinforces the point by saying it twice, to the Greek and to the Barbarian, and to the wise and to the unwise. It is in fact a slightly odd distinction, because everyone is either educated or uneducated. It is like saying, "I have a duty to preach to both men and to women, and therefore I have to come and preach to you". When a great reasoner like Paul says something without much apparent logic like this, it gets our attention even more. Why did he do that? To emphasize to us that he is really bringing up a vital concept here, at the start of his epistle, and he does not want us to miss what he is saying, namely: Greek = literate, (& barbarian = illiterate). I am stressing this point because I have never read a commentary which catches this, and it is important, critical actually. These are not arbitrary terms Paul is using, and we will be somewhat lost, especially in the first three chapters, if we miss this point.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith

Many erroneous versions of the bible, like the KJV, translate 'Hellas' in this verse as Gentiles. This has led to one of the most prevalent and in many ways most pernicious misunderstandings in all of scripture. Namely that the Jews had pre-eminence in the Church in the eyes of Paul. This misunderstanding is then fleshed out with the fact that Paul's first port of ministry call was always the synagogues, and then topped off with the triumphal flourish of Jesus's statement, "Salvation is of the Jews", as if anybody with the payot and a yarmulke merely has to look at us and we are all the holier for the experience. The trouble is, they have all got Paul completely back to front. There is no reason whatsoever to translate Hellas as gentiles. It means what it means, namely: Greek. Paul has already given us a very precise definition of what Greek means, two verses earlier, so to throw it away and introduce another totally alien definition here is beyond comprehension.

Why would Paul be ashamed of the gospel? It is a strange statement really, coming from a man who devoted his life to the gospel more than perhaps virtually any other, and who never shied away from declaring his faith. 'From faith to faith', 'ek pistis eis pistis' in Greek, means literally

from the starting point of faith to the end point of faith. So what Paul is saying is that the gospel shows us how to live a righteous life, by showing us how to complete the faith journey, from start to finish. How does it do that? By the example of Christ, who was faithful unto death, (Rev 2:10). To be a real overcomer, we need to be faithful from start to finish. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:7-8, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness'. Finishing the race, going from start to finish, Paul equates with keeping the faith. That is what he is saying here. He is not ashamed of the gospel, because he has come up to its standard of righteousness. Or put another way, he has not fallen away when the going got tough.

His next point is to differentiate between Jews and Greeks, and by implication all others, (e.g. barbarians). So why 'to the Jew first, and also to the Greek', i.e. to the Jew and the Greek first? The common misconception here is that Paul is working to the same template as Jesus, and going to 'his own' first. But this is palpable nonsense. Any of the following reasons debunks it, take your pick.

Firstly, he is going to the Jews and the Greeks at the same time, giving them equivalency, so that reduces such an idea to a completely wrong reading of the text. (Does 'blow it out of the water' sound erudite enough?)

Secondly, if Paul was following Jesus' lead, then he would have to, like Jesus, be shunning the nations, not going out to them, and he would also have to completely violate the angel's instructions, which were to go to "Israel, Kings, and the Nations." Notwithstanding that Jesus had already completed that aspect of the covenant: Acts 13: 32-33: "And we declare unto you glad tidings, how that the promise which was made unto the fathers, God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again"

Thirdly, and equally damning of this false concept, Jesus quite simply did not go to the Jews first, he went to the whole House of Israel. So even if Paul were indeed extending the covenantal agreement, then he would need to go to all Israel first, not just the Jews.

Finally, should someone wish to argue that maybe some of the House of Israel, a few Jews here and there, had not received the message and Paul needed to catch them first, this does not hold water either. Paul has already thanked the Roman church for sending the gospel to the entire world, so it is clear that there is no practical necessity for that. Even if there were, as per the previous point, he would need to express such an injunction under the covenant to Israel.

So the question remains, what does Paul mean here, what is his rationale? I believe that when we study Paul's actions and thinking closely, we will see complexity of motive. I think he had several reasons for going to the Jews and Greeks first, not just one reason. However, in the showdown between Paul and Barnabas and the rabbis at Antioch of Pisidia, Paul and Barnabas declare, "it was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you," giving us an overriding reason

for Paul going to the Jews first, one without any optionality. So we need to establish what this binding obligation is, before we consider the other volitional elements of his decision making.

As we have already noted, Paul always went into the synagogues first whenever he arrived in a new place, a practice that many take to denote some sort of special concession to the Jews. The question is, why did he do this? Paul states that his mission field priority was to go where Christ had not been proclaimed, which seems to suggest his primary focus was universality, not exclusivity. Wherever he went then, he preached to everyone, according to his commission. We should also take note that Paul was not a freeloader, he did not sponge off the churches he set up; he was a skilled tentmaker and he ran his business wherever he went. This enabled him to contribute to the poor and needy on several occasions. As he worked during the week, he liked to go into the synagogue on Friday night, or Saturday morning, when he wasn't working. This was his custom we are told, meaning either the custom he had followed his entire life, or his custom on entering a new locality, or both. Just because he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath, it does not mean that he was not simultaneously preaching to non-Jews when the occasion arose during the rest of the week. In fact we know he was, because we are told that he preached everywhere, not just in the synagogue.

Acts 17: 16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. 17 So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there.

We also know full well that the synagogue gave him direct access to the gentile community in the form of the Greek converts. However, the contentious point here is that Paul's entire ministry throughout Acts features an itinerary apparently based around going from synagogue to synagogue, as if his primary focus was the Jews. In fact this central issue of Acts is fundamental to our understanding of many things in the post resurrection accounts of the New Testament, for not only was Paul funnelling all his activities through the synagogues, but the apostles maintained a Church HQ in Jerusalem, which was strictly conforming to Jewish practices, (who however Paul eventually came into conflict with).

To understand the bigger picture of what is going on here, we really need to understand the historical conditions of the Roman empire. It is worth recollecting the description of the Roman Empire from Daniel 7:

7 After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet.

The Roman Empire was uncompromisingly brutal, and brooked no dissent. The Roman laws against foreign religions prohibited worship of any gods other than the Roman gods. The only exception to this rule was the Jewish religion, which had been granted special status under Julius

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Caesar and Augustus, as a religion of great antiquity, and therefore synagogues were accorded the status of colleges rather than places of worship, so as to avoid breaching Roman Law, and Judaism was declared a 'religio licita'. When we understand this fact, much of the behaviour of the early church falls into place. The core issue here is that the church had to operate under the banner of Judaism to remain legal; if it severed its link with Judaism, it would have become an illegal affront to the Romans, and would have been outlawed and stamped out ruthlessly by Rome. Furthermore, the Church in Jerusalem was prophetically covenanted to remain in situ until AD 67, as per Daniel 9, so the Christian Church was covenantally unable to break away from Jerusalem at this point.

The Roman authorities of course had been established by God himself. The four beast kingdoms of Daniel were imposed on Judea as punishment, as the Jews were deemed unfit to govern themselves. We nowhere see Jesus or Paul break Roman Law. Paul explains in Romans 13 that the Roman authorities have been established by God, and that their laws need to be adhered to. So we now see why the early Christian church had to operate under the banner of Judaism as, for the Church to be legal, it had to identify itself as a branch of Judaism. So what we in effect have is the one living God being broadcast out of the defunct religion of Judaism. This is pictured for us in the riddle of Samson's Lion, where bees and honey come from the carcass of the lion. The corpse of the lion represents Jerusalem and the Levitical system, the honey represents Christ's work of salvation and the gospel of the new covenant, and the bees represent the predominantly Jewish ministers of the new covenant going out to all nations.

But now we have established the answer to the necessity of Paul going to the Jews, it was a legal necessity, and now we understand why Paul stressed the issue of learning in relation to the Greeks, as his ministry had to be conducted through the 'Institutes of Higher Learning' so to speak, under which proxy the synagogues operated.

Except that this is not the only necessity; Paul is not merely restrained by Roman Law, he is also governed by an even higher imperative.

The Torah was first translated from Hebrew into Greek by 70 scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, between 300-132 BC. Once the bible was available in Koine Greek, new vistas opened up for the Jews. I am not an expert on this period of history, so I cannot give more than a delineation of how the Greek empire was affected by Judaism, and vice versa, however, it is clear that a new branch of Judaism evolved, known as Hellenistic Judaism, and that where previously Israel and Judea had been relatively inward looking nations, Judea in the age of the Greek empire embraced Greek culture at the expense of Hebrew culture and started to expand its influence overseas. Once the bible was in the universal language of Greek, rather than parochial Hebrew, it became possible to spread the faith of Judaism. Alongside the incidences of proselytizing in Rome I have already mentioned, we have various biblical evidences of this also: At Pentecost we are told of Jews coming from Rome along with proselytes; we have Jesus haranguing the Pharisees for proselytizing abroad, (Matthew 23:15); and of course when Paul is on his missionary journeys, we

see the synagogues replete with Greeks. So even if proselytizing was a subversive activity and therefore not well-documented, which I believe it may well have been as it is quite conceivable that Judaism was attempting to infiltrate itself as the official religion of the Roman Empire, we still have ample instances which demonstrate how major an operation it had become for the Jews.

As a monotheistic religion, grounded in the oracles of the Almighty, it was a very attractive religion to many educated Greeks, as they lost interest in their homespun polytheistic myths and sought for something of substance. The debates and conflicts over Judaizers in the church, for instance the attempt to get non-Israelite converts to Christianity to be circumcised, really reflect how extensive Judaic proselytization was, for in that instance, the convert very definitely had to be conformed to strict Judaic practices and rites. All in all we can see that the Jewish faith had very definitely spread its tentacles across the Roman empire and that Judaism had embraced both Greek culture and a lot of non Jews into its ranks. Peter said it was impossible keeping up with the Law as an ethnic Hebrew, so unless you knew Greek, and could study the Koine Bible, you clearly had no chance. So the Koine Bible was undoubtedly a tool for proselytization, and Greek itself was the language of proselytization.

Now we can review Paul's comments and understand better what he is saying. If the synagogues were a mixture of ethnic Jews and converted Greeks, (Greek speakers), why would this have been a problem to Paul?

The problem arises because God had made a very clear adjudication against Judah and Jerusalem during the time of Daniel and King Cyrus almost 700 years previously, which entailed a very serious judgement; this judgement was prescribed solely for the Jews, those at least who chose to reject him, and the Greeks were nothing whatsoever to do with it. God had no axe to grind with them, they were not the objects of his wrath, and he had no desire for them to be caught up in the pending judgement of Jerusalem. If a Greek went up to Jerusalem for a festival and got entrapped in the judgement, this would have been a travesty of justice, and God hates injustice. Now we can understand exactly what Jesus rebuke to the Pharisees really meant:

Matthew 23 15 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you cross sea and land to make a single convert, and you make the new convert twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.

The biblical penalty for theft was double repayment. What Jesus was saying was that the Pharisees were stealing people and turning them into 'huios geena', sons of destruction. Literally, they were being illicitly brought (i.e. stolen) into the destruction of Jerusalem.

So when Paul spoke of being under a binding obligation ('opheiletēs') to the Greeks and Barbarians, he meant that his duty, by divine ordination, was to rescue certain people from misjudgement.

So now we can fully see Paul's obligations for what they are, both a legal necessity to be

compliant with Roman Law, and an absolute necessity from the throne of judgement in heaven, the latter clearly being superior in force than the former, but both being of great importance. Once we understand these two reasons, we can frame things in their proper perspective. The overarching spiritual necessity and focus of Paul's ministry was to rescue Greeks from Judaism, because of the threat of accidental judgement.

Secondary to both of these imperatives, Paul may have had other personal and practical motives. The synagogues were a rich field for ministry, as the Greeks were there already. He clearly had a heart for the Jews, as he states that wish he could be accursed for them; he wanted them to convert, and reckoned that if they saw Greeks flocking from Judaism to Christ, they would get envious and want to be part of the action. But these are not his primary drivers; this is just Paul the pragmatist at work, looking for an opportunity in every situation. When we come to Chapter 2 of Romans, we will see him spell it out clearly; the issue is wrath and glory. It is a case of either being ensnared in the judgement of Judea and Jerusalem, or not.

At a different level, Paul was in a serious war with Hellenistic Judaism. The Jews were the enemies of the Gospel. Every Jew and Greek converted was really a treble victory, because on top of bringing someone into the kingdom, he had also nullified their missionary activity in the wrong direction, and brought their missionary zeal over to Christ's side. He was in a spiritual conflict with Judaism, and out of the necessity of being in the synagogues, he tried to construct a battle plan to suit, but this is not to be confused with the two aforesaid absolute factors governing his behaviour.

17 as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

The just shall live by faith is a reference from the Book of Habakkuk. In Habakkuk the prophet is told by God of the impending invasion of Judea by the Babylonians. The prophet believes that the judgement is too severe, but God tells him the crooked man shall fall, but the just shall live by his faith. Applying the same principle here, Paul is simply saying that the people immersed in the OT teachings, principally Jews along with Greek speaking proselytes, will either stand or fall according to their faith. Those with faith accept Christ, the rest do not.

Verses 18 - 32 form a unit of thought. Paul introduces the main concept in verse 18.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness

The main theme here is people who hold the truth in unrighteousness. Paul means here the Jews, who uphold the truth (the Torah) but reject Christ (righteousness). This is in fact the central theme of the whole book of Romans, apostate Judaism; Christ-rejecting Jews. The wrath of God obviously refers to the impending (and ongoing) judgements on Jerusalem and Judea, (echoing Habakkuk, as the Roman forces of AD 66-70 mirror the Babylonian forces of Habakkuk's day). Paul then

goes on to really draw a comparison between the ancient Israelites and the modern day Jews. He describes a picture of the ancient Israelites, who turned their back on God in the wilderness and started worshipping the Egyptian gods, and places that same stencil on the modern day reprobate Jews. However, whereas the ancient Israelites came out of Egypt, the modern day Jews are coming out of Greek culture, (and colonization), and so we see rather than a fusion of Israelite belief with Egyptian idols, a fusion of Jewish belief with Greek idols, not to mention the host of Babylonian deities that the Jews had picked up in their Babylonian exile.

21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened

Paul really seems to overlay two pictures here. One is of ancient Israel, rejecting Moses and falling into apostasy in the wilderness, (a spiritual pattern mentioned elsewhere, e.g. Hebrews, and Acts 7, “You also took up the tabernacle of Moloch, And the star of your god Remphan”), and the subsequent apostasy that blighted the history of Israel. The other picture is of the 1st Century Jews. What Paul is saying is that Israel first came into contact with God on Mount Sinai, and promptly rejected him, falling into all sorts of abominations, and the precise same pattern is revealing itself against the Jews of his day in regards to Jesus. He then links the homosexuality, perversion and depravity of secular Greek culture with the Jews, illustrating precisely what kinds of abominations Hellenistic Judaism was falling into. This is also in part prophetic, insofar as Paul is laying out the blueprint for apostate Judaism in the last days.

This is in fact the central theme and admonition of Romans. The apostasy of the Jews who reject Christ, and its consequences. When Paul links the Jews and the Greeks in the same breath, “to the Jew first, and also the Greek”, it is not without a certain irony. Paul is also pointing out that Judaism and Greek culture have become joined at the hip. God warned Israel not to intermingle and adopt their neighbour's gods. Paul's careful use of language is revealing to us that the Jews have repudiated the priestly function of Israel, to be set apart as a peculiar treasure to God, and have instead embraced the cultural degeneracy of Greek values.