

Romans

Paul's letter to the Christ-communities in Rome is the only letter he wrote to people he didn't know; Paul had never been to Rome. Most [scholars] think Romans is the last of the universally agreed upon seven genuine letters of Paul. He wrote it from Corinth around the year 58, just before he began what became his final journey to Jerusalem, arrest, imprisonment, and eventual execution in Rome itself. So this letter is not about interacting with a community he had founded or with which he had a continuing relationship. Rather, its main purpose was to introduce himself to a group of Christ-followers whom he planned to visit and from whom he receive support for a mission to Spain. Romans is the most theological of Paul's letters, and the most important of his letters in the history of Christian theology. ¹

Historical Context

The letter has another primary purpose, namely explicating [전개, 분석, 해명] its central theme of the relationship between Jew and Gentile in the context of God's covenant with Israel. The first verse of body of the letter announces it. The gospel is the power of God for salvation "to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek (1:16; recall that "Greek" means "Gentile"). In chapter 9-11, the theme of God's covenant with Israel, including Jews who had not become followers of Jesus, is explicit. Some scholars think these chapters are the climax and heart of the letter. ²

Why this emphasis is so strong in Romans is explained by the historical context of the Christ-communities in Rome. [Although we do not know when and who founded the Christ-communities in Rome] we do know that there were

¹ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 119.

² Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 120.

Christ-communities in Rome by mid-40s at the latest. Some in them would have been Christian Jews, and some would have been Christian Gentiles, most of them "God-lovers" In the year 49, the emperor Claudius ordered the expulsion of Jews from Rome. Christian Jews, of course, were also expelled. Thus, from roughly 49 or 50 on, the Christ-communities in Rome would have become primarily and perhaps completely Gentile. The Christian Jews were gone. Then, in 54, Claudius' edict [칙령] was rescinded [철회, 취소). How many Jews returned and how quickly they did so are unknown. But the process was under way in the years immediately before and as Paul wrote this letter.³

Jews and Gentiles, and the mess the world is in

The section begins with Paul's indictment of the Gentile world (Rom. 1:18-2:16). He recites standard Jewish stereotypes of what Gentiles are like; they are idolaters who should know better, exchanging the truth for a lie and worshipping the creation rather than the creator. A long list of Gentile vices follows, beginning with unnatural sexual relationships and continuing with "wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness." Gentiles are "gossips, slanderers, ruthless" (1:29-31). This is pretty harsh rhetoric. There can be good Gentiles. His indictment is of the Gentile "world" - "this world," as he commonly refers to it.⁴

In 2:17, he turns to the guilt and responsibility of Jews for the way the world is. His main claim is that having the "law" (the Torah, the Bible) does not exempt you from judgment unless you live it. So also circumcision is of no value unless it is internal, not merely external. Yet Jews have priority; to them were revealed the promises of God. But the section ends with a common indictment of Jews and Gentiles as responsible for the mess the world is in (3:9-20). They share a solidarity of failure.⁵

³ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 120.

⁴ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 121.

⁵ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 121.

Both Jews and Gentiles justified by grace through faith

"Justification by faith" has commonly been understood, "to be saved" and "salvation" mean a blessed afterlife - going to heaven when we die. The means by which we are saved are not good works, even though they matter. What ultimately matters is faith, understood as believing in Jesus. From this good works will flow. But faith (as believing in Jesus) is primary. It is the gateway to heaven. The preceding interpretation is a serious misunderstanding of Paul's use of these words. The greatest distortion is caused by imagining that Paul was writing about "how to get to heaven," that is, that his concern was primarily the afterlife and how a concern for that life should affect how we lead this life. Within this framework, "if you want to go to heaven, believe in Jesus."⁶

But heaven, the afterlife, was not central to Paul and early Christianity. Did they believe in afterlife? Most, perhaps all, did. But was that the main focus for how they saw Jesus? That he provides the way to get to heaven? No. For Paul, "salvation" was not primarily about an afterlife, but about transformation this side of death- the transformation of ourselves and of "this world." Justification by grace through faith is not about how we get to heaven, but how we are transformed here and now. So Paul was not addressing the question of eternal salvation in heaven and how to get there. Rather, as he wrote about justification and grace and faith, he was addressing the issue of Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles; both, he affirms, are justified by grace through faith in Jesus. They are equals in the solidarity of failure and in the solidarity of grace, and equally dependent on the same grace.⁷

We note also that "faith" and what it means to "believe in Jesus" have often been misunderstood. The misunderstanding is that "faith" means "believing" a set of teachings/doctrines/beliefs/statements about Jesus. This misunderstanding has grown in Western culture over the last three centuries or so. Beliefs about

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 122.

⁷ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 122.

Jesus - that he was born of a virgin, that he walked on water and changed water into wine, that he died for our sins and rose again on the third day, that he is the Son of God and the only way, and so forth- have changed from what everybody took for granted to claims that are questionable in the minds of many. So "faith," "believing," has come to mean believing a particular set of claims about Jesus to be true in spite of perhaps somewhat persuasive reasons to question them. ⁸

But this is not what Paul (and early Christians generally and their spiritual ancestors in the Jewish Bible) meant by "faith." The word has two primary meanings: loyalty and trust. Loyalty, was about commitment and allegiance - not to a set of statements, but to a person. Its opposite was not doubt, but betrayal. Trust was about who or what you trusted. Its opposite was not intellectual doubt, but anxiety. Faith for Paul was about loyalty to and trust in Christ, not about believing a set of statements to be true. Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles alike are justified together by God's grace and by faith - loyalty and trust - in what God has revealed in Jesus. ⁹

Romans 15-16

What is most striking about these chapters is the list of people in Romans 16. It begins by commending to them a woman named Phoebe, named as a deacon or minister and benefactor. Presumably she carried the letter to Rome and read it to the Christ-communities there. Reading it would also have involved explaining it whenever there were questions. On the list, of those who are named, some are clearly Christian Jews and others Christian Gentiles. Even more striking is the number of women's names. Of the twenty-eight individuals mentioned, ten are women. Of the eleven singled out for special praise, five are women. Paul uses the Greek verb for dedicated apostolic activity to refer to four of these women. One, Junia, is spoken of as "prominent among the apostles."

⁸ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 123.

⁹ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 123.

Leadership by women was a fact in early Christ-communities. Not only did Paul not challenged; he obviously approved of it.¹⁰

¹⁰ Marcus J. Borg, *Evolution of the Word* (N.Y.: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 125.