

Introduction

The writing we know as “The Epistle of St Paul to the Romans” can be difficult to grasp for several reasons. It is Paul’s longest letter and the longest letter in the New Testament, containing 7,114 words in the Greek version. The next longest writing is the Gospel of Mark which contains 11,312 words while the Gospel of Luke contains 19,495 words. The letter of 1 Corinthians is nearly as long with 6,841 words, while 2 Corinthians has 4,488 words. Looking at Paul’s letter to the Romans is a challenge also because the ways people thought and wrote in the first century are nearly incomprehensible to those of us in the 21st century. In order to better understand, while at the same time better approximating, the first century audience and its acquaintance with Paul’s letter to the Romans it will be necessary to discuss some preliminary issues before grappling with the text. The better one comprehends these issues, the better one can keep them in mind as we progress through the text of Romans. On various occasions, I will refer to these issues for assistance in clarifying the text of Paul’s letter.

Exegesis and Hermeneutics

First among these introductory issues are two words whose meaning is not always agreed on by scholars so it is necessary to explain how I will use them in this book. The first word is **exegesis**. Exegesis simply means “what did the text say or mean originally.” The second word is **hermeneutics**, which simply means “what does the text say or mean today.” For example, when discussing the concept of Paul’s first audience we are approaching it from the vantage point of exegesis. When we move to questions of the 21st century then we are asking hermeneutical questions. It is critical to understand the distinction because when someone asks the question, “what does this

verse *mean?*” it is unclear whether they mean then or now! When one receives an exegetical answer to a hermeneutical question they don’t think they had their question answered. These two words will help us keep on track as we process through Paul's letter to the Romans.

As I mentioned in the previous paragraph these two words, exegesis and hermeneutics, are often assigned various meanings, Hermeneutics is frequently used to refer to the entire process of interpretation. I prefer to use the word interpretation to refer to the entire process of interpretation. When we read the Bible, we are interpreting the Bible. When we study the Bible we begin to ask questions about the Bible, about the specific passage, about meaning, about authorial intent, and even about how we should apply the passage to our lives today. These are stages in the process of interpretation. By separating the lengthy and sometimes complex process into these two concepts, exegesis and hermeneutics, it becomes possible and highly probable that we can focus on one or perhaps two elements of the interpretive process at one point in time. Therefore, when we ask questions about the Bible and the passage involved we can determine whether the question should be answered from the perspective of the first century or the 21st century.

So to recap; the two words, exegesis and hermeneutics, refer to two concepts, “what did the text say or mean originally” and “what does the text say or mean today” respectively. Most of this book will discuss questions from the viewpoint of exegesis. That simply means that we will try to determine what Paul was trying to say, how Paul was structuring his words, and how the audience would have received or heard what he says in this letter.

One of the first questions about this monumental book found in the New Testament is to whom was Paul writing? As with so many questions I will ask there are a variety of probable answers, many of them coming from a simple matter of focus or emphasis. One of the first things we can establish about the audience of Paul is that they lived in or around the ancient city of Rome. If we wanted to compare this to a modern example it would be as if Paul were writing to those who live in or around the modern city of Washington, D. C. The fact that these people to whom Paul writes live in or around the ancient city of Rome has a tremendous impact on why he writes the letter, how he words the letter, and what he hopes to gain from the letter. Because he is writing to a group of people in the city of Rome one of the more important facts to understand is that Paul is not the founder of the church, or more precisely churches, in Rome. Paul had not traveled to Rome prior to writing this letter. This statement does not mean that Paul does not know anyone who lives in Rome. The list of people he does know can be found in the 16th chapter of Paul's letter. Two of these names are familiar to many, Priscilla and Aquila, who he met during his first period of time spent at Corinth.

Reason for Letter

A second piece of information about the letter is found in both the beginning chapter and in chapter 15; Paul was hoping to gain financial support from the people in Rome as he traveled to Spain. In other words, he was hoping to have the same type of relationship with the Christians living in Rome as he did with those living in Philippi. We find in these very same sections that Paul's immediate intent and plan is to return to Jerusalem with an offering collected during his travels in the Roman provinces of Macedonia and Achaia for relief of the consequences of the current drought in Palestine

so that Christians, Jewish Christians specifically, might be sustained during this difficult time. After delivering the offering and celebrating the Pentecost festival in Jerusalem Paul plans to travel to Rome. These events did not happen as Paul indicated in the letter as he was delayed due to the riot that occurred when he went up to the Temple. However, when Paul writes this letter his words indicate that he thinks it will be but a short time before he actually does visit Rome for the first time. This information helps us to understand that Paul is not exhaustive in declaring everything he wants to say to the churches at Rome.

Date and Location of Writing

The final piece of information we should clarify at this point is that Paul is writing from the city of Corinth. This puts the letter at or around the year 58. One might ask, does it matter when Paul writes this letter? The answer would be, yes! The reason it matters that Paul writes this in the year 58 is that he has been traveling throughout the Northeast Mediterranean region since the year 46. For a period of twelve years Paul has been talking, preaching, teaching, and even arguing with inhabitants of modern day Turkey and Greece, or from an exegetical viewpoint the Roman provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, Achaia, as well as several other smaller regions mentioned in his travels. When Paul begins to write this letter to the Romans he has had twelve years of active engagement with both positive and negative listeners to his proclamation. Thus, what we find in Romans is a well defined argument Paul has had practice honing and clarifying the past twelve years.

On the preceding information there is very little debate, although you might expect that someone, somewhere, at some time would take a different opinion. In the

next area there is considerable discussion and even disagreement. The debate revolves around the purpose of Paul's letter to the Romans. The first opinion proposes that Paul writes this letter to the churches of Rome to tell them his plans. The second understands Paul's purpose as writing Romans to deal with a crisis he has become aware of. The difficulty for understanding Paul's purpose comes in that the first is plainly stated in the text while the second is often found or perhaps described as the scenario behind the text. Because Paul writes so many of his letters to deal with a specific problem in a specific town it is easy to jump to the same conclusion when one reads the letter to the Romans. By the way I have stated these two opposing positions you probably recognize that I prefer the first. However, at various points in the Paul's letter we will raise the possibility that the information presented in the text might possibly respond to scenario two.

Chapter 16

Although we will not discuss chapter 16 until much later in this book it is helpful to look at its purpose before we begin. Chapter 16 begins with Paul's commendation of Phoebe who carried this letter from the city of Corinth, although to be specific she is from a city on its eastern side called Cenchrae, to the city of Rome. At this time in history there was no official Postal Service available to common individuals. Letters were hand carried by someone going in that same direction. Chapter 16 begins by praising Phoebe for delivering this letter to the Christians living in the region of Rome; both Jewish and Gentile. Having heard the entire preceding letter read, the listing of names of local inhabitants to whom Paul sends his greetings serves to assure those who don't know who Paul is or only have rumors about Paul that this letter and Paul

himself are trustworthy. By listing his connection to a group of individuals Paul provides the opportunity for anyone who has a question about him personally or about his teaching to inquire of someone local and esteemed in the community.

Problems with Hermeneutics

After providing some basic information about the first century background of this letter it is necessary to address some interpretive concerns. There are three major problems that present themselves when one seeks to understand, i.e. interpret, this epistle. You will recall that the word used to describe the process of understanding what the Bible means today is hermeneutics. The first of these problems is a false hermeneutic based on a modern concept and understanding of the individual. Paul writes this letter in the year 58. The modern concept of the individual begins with Descartes and his proclamation "I think, therefore I am." When one reads Paul's letter to the Romans in the 21st century and indeed in the 19th and 20th centuries one automatically thinks that Paul is addressing individuals, specifically regarding the topic of their salvation. This focus on the individual and, in the United States specifically, a radical individualization of the individual as the basis for all knowledge and understanding leaves one severely short of understanding Paul in the first century. However, it is exceedingly difficult for a modern individual to eliminate this basic, built in, perception. Only by naming the elephant in the room when the time arises can one begin to comprehend the exegetical position of Paul.

A second problem for understanding is a false hermeneutic based on church doctrinal developments. This basic phrase means that over the 20 centuries between the time Paul writes this letter and you or I read this letter the church, as a whole and in

its parts, has devised a large number of doctrinal teaching statements that would be foreign to Paul in the way they are phrased. Although Paul's writing may actually substantiate these doctrines and undergird them, since they are to represent what Scripture teaches, Paul did not write to defend or define any of these doctrinal developments. When we read his writing through the lenses of various confessions, creeds, or councils and allow those lenses to define prior to our reading what Paul means, then we misread Paul.

The final problem I wish to mention is when we attempt to make theology as it is found in Paul's letter theoretical and not practical. Paul does not write a theological treatise. Paul does not write a systematic theology. Although Paul writes a letter that contains theology Paul's major concern is on the day-to-day expression and proclamation of a message. Paul does not look to clarify theology for the 21st century reader. Instead, Paul writes to individuals, whom he knows and does not know, in order to explain who he is and what he teaches.

Ancient Writings

Once we understand the major difference between exegesis and hermeneutics and problems surrounding this pursuit to find out what the biblical text 'means', it is possible to introduce the concepts basic for understanding ancient writings. There are three areas to discuss; the genre, style of rhetoric, and audience conventions. As with most of the topics we discussed earlier there are various viewpoints on each of these. Nevertheless, it will make our work of reading the letter to the Romans more manageable if I simply communicate a basic understanding.

Genre

Our first topic is genre, a word that simply means the type of writing we are examining. There are a variety of genres in the Bible, the most common ones being law code, narrative, poetry, and letters. Because we are looking at Paul's letter to the Romans the genre for this particular writing seems obvious. However, we read an ancient letter differently from modern letters. Elements are present, elements are rearranged, and some elements are perhaps missing from modern letters. There are basically five elements in an ancient letter; the salutation, the prayer or thanksgiving section, the body of the letter, a section known as *paranesis*, and the conclusion. I will discuss each of these briefly so we might have a better understanding not only of how they compare to modern letters but also what elements we might expect to find so that we too can identify various parts of Paul's letter with their basic element.

The salutation is sometimes known as the greeting or opening. This part of the letter will include the name of the author or sender, names of the recipient or audience, and a basic greeting or hello. The salutation occurs first in an ancient letter primarily because they did not have envelopes. When one opened a scroll or perhaps a parchment or collection of parchment pages it would be necessary to identify from whom the letter is sent. That is why in each of the New Testament letters where a salutation is still included the letter begins with a name: Paul, Simon Peter, Jude, James. There are some "letters" that do not have a salutation, Hebrews and 1John to name two. We will discuss more about the salutation as we begin looking at the text of Romans 1.

The prayer or thanksgiving section of the letter is very common. This means that

in many ancient letters, not just those in the Bible, there is a section following the salutation that offers a prayer to the gods in non-Christian writings or a God for those monotheists or else a word of thanksgiving for what someone has done in the past. This is an expected part in the letter just as in modern letters we usually begin with “dear John Doe” and immediately proceed to a statement most commonly phrased as, "how are you" or "I've been thinking of you." Just as in a modern letter there is a form to writing and starting the letter there is a form in ancient letters. That is why in nearly every letter of the New Testament, when there is a salutation you will also find the prayer or thanksgiving section immediately following.

The third section is known as the body of the letter. This is not a very creative name nor is it a very long name but it does indicate that the bulk of the letter is about a specific question or topic. By identifying the body of the letter and studying that body it becomes possible to determine the major purpose and reason for the author writing this letter. A fourth section is known as the *paranesis*, or in English the ethical teaching section. This is the place where the author gives instructions or describes behavior the audience is expected to follow based on the teaching of the body of the letter. These two sections are normally separate from one another and easily distinguishable. The body typically flows in a relatively long, descriptive, complex, series of statements that oftentimes repeat themselves or perhaps appear to build one upon the other. The *paranesis* on the other hand is a short, rapidfire, one after the other, set of instructions, commands, and apparent teaching that the author expects the audience to fulfill quickly and promptly with total obedience because it would make no sense to agree with the body of the letter and not fulfill the ethical teaching. In musical terms the body is played

at andante while the *paranesis* is played at allegro.

The final section of the letter is the conclusion. Here it is common practice for the author to repeat or rephrase some teaching or thought from the body of letter, or to include thoughts introduced during the salutation or prayer sections. The other element of the conclusion is that the author sends greetings to those individuals he knows in the location receiving a letter. Just as in a modern letter we may stop at the end before we sign our name and tell our daughter Suzy to say hello to her husband Bill, child Bob, and Aunt Sally who lives near her.

Understanding these five elements of a letter helps distinguish the ebb and flow of the letter and prioritize sections that would have greater focus and weight in determining the purpose, content, and teaching of the letter. We naturally understand this from our experience with modern letters so that when we receive a hand written note from a specific friend who starts the note with "dear John" we do not ponder what that person meant or is suggesting by the use of the word "dear". We know that this salutation is common in letters, especially those that are hand written, and we move on to the more interesting elements of the letter. If you are the parent of a child who has moved out of the house you frequently scan their letter for the famous words "please send money".

Rhetorical Methods

The second topic about ancient letters we introduced by name was rhetoric, which simply means the way in which one phrases their argument of persuasion. When we write someone a letter even in the modern era we usually want them to do something, to write us back, to give thought to an issue, or to be nice to the one

delivering the letter. Depending upon our intent we phrase the letter differently. This is also the case in the ancient world. The most common type of rhetoric used and what we find in Romans — by this time you might already anticipate that there are a variety of opinions about this following statement — is diatribe. The word diatribe as used regarding ancient letters is far different than how it is used today. In the modern world diatribe has a negative connotation as it usually represents a bitter verbal attack. However, in its Greek element the word means spending time or having a discourse or discussion. When one reads an ancient letter without understanding diatribe it is extremely easy, and highly probable, to misunderstand what is being communicated. In the same way, today one could walk into a room and hear conversation that appears to be loud, bold, and forceful. The two participants might also be facing one another. Yet because we were not there at the beginning of the conversation we do not know if they are truly angry or simply "letting off steam". When we look at a Greek letter that utilizes diatribe we can also misunderstand when we think that the author is making a statement when in reality the author is rephrasing or repeating a statement made by the audience. So it is very helpful to have in mind the concept of diatribe and how it worked in the ancient Roman and Greek society.

We have identified that diatribe is a common practice in the ancient world so now it is useful to understand how it progresses. Diatribe begins with a statement of the thesis, in other words the author says right up front what they're going to talk about. However, unlike modern speeches, the thesis is immediately followed by the antithesis statement which is then discussed through the use of examples. These examples may compare and contrast with the thesis in order to say what the author is **not** intending to

say. Having described the antithesis in detail the author then returns to the thesis and describes the thesis through the use of examples and contrasting statements. We can see from this simple description that if a modern reader does not understand that an ancient text is using diatribe as its major rhetoric then it becomes easy to think that the author is saying one thing when in all actuality they are truly saying the opposite.

Diatribe is important to understand because Paul was a well-educated individual. He grew up in a town noted for the education of its citizens and we know that he also studied within a Jewish setting. We can expect him to use rhetoric, specifically diatribe, because he converses with non-Jews. But we should also expect him to use a Jewish style of rhetoric because Paul was trained as a Pharisee. The Jewish style of rhetoric that the Pharisees practiced is known as midrash. Jewish midrash interpreted the Torah in terms of the Exodus and the Exile. At one point Paul, using Jewish midrash to interpret the Torah, concluded that Jesus was cursed because he died on a tree. As a result of this understanding of Scripture Paul persecuted early followers of Jesus. However, once Paul himself became a follower of Jesus he began to use Jewish midrash in light of the resurrection of Jesus. Because the majority, if not the totality, of the earliest Christians were Jews much of the New Testament is written from a Jewish perspective, in the sense that the writers were first century Jews. One of the ways we can understand that Paul is using midrash is that in his argument he will introduce a Scripture passage as proof, some might see it as a proof text, of his point. This practice would not make natural sense to Gentile Christians unless they had been trained in Jewish rhetoric. However it would be perfectly acceptable to Jewish Christians of the first century.

Audience Conventions

Our next element concerns how an audience hears a text when it is communicated. The phrase used to describe this process is “audience conventions”. While the term may sound vague, all it really means is how the audience hears what you say. The words, “Black and Gold” have a variety of meanings based on a person’s preknowledge of those words. Some avid fans may think it means the Pittsburgh Steelers, while another may associate those words with their local middle school. In a similar fashion the phrase “black gold, Texas Tea” will mean something special to some readers while others do not have the theme song from the Beverly Hillbillies running through their head. This type of conceptual knowledge and word association is what is meant by audience conventions. As Paul writes the letter he makes many assumptions about his audience and their understanding. First and foremost he assumes that they understand Greek, because the letter is written in that language. Very few modern readers would understand a word Paul wrote if we only had the Greek text and no translations into English. So too, there are many words and ideas Paul uses that have taken on specific meaning through the years—remember a few pages ago when we discussed problems for understanding Romans—words like Baptism, the Holy Spirit and ideas like the return of Jesus and the supreme commandment. When Paul discusses these ideas in his letter, he assumes that the audience perceives them the same way as he does, thus we usually don’t find extended support in Paul clarifying one particular denominational way of thinking. For example, in chapter 6 Paul discusses baptism as an example in his diatribe rhetoric. It would be nice for us today if at that point in time Paul had taken a few more paragraphs to clarify exactly what he meant when he used

this word "baptism." Since that time followers of Jesus have developed a variety of ideas when the word "baptism" is used; adult baptism, infant baptism, Spirit baptism just to name a few. Some of the other areas where Paul does not exactly show his thought process is when he includes ideas such as how the Torah should be perceived or that the Holy Spirit is the source of life. Because Paul is a Jew he understands that Torah is instruction from God, associated with Moses, and that not only is there a written Torah but there is also an oral Torah. Because Paul is a Christian and received the Holy Spirit he understands, and assumes that his audience understands, that apart from the Holy Spirit indwelling a follower of Jesus that person is not alive in Christ but rather simply dead.

A further audience convention is that Paul assumes the Roman audience understands what he is talking about when he refers to the soon coming return of Jesus, in other words the Parousia. Paul anticipates that Jesus will return while he is alive and this thought permeates his writing. Very few readers today anticipate that Jesus will return during the lifetime of Paul, some do not even anticipate his return in their lifetime. A final assumption Paul makes is that the reader will view Jesus as the supreme example for how one should live. At that time, within the Greco-Roman world there were many schools of thought regarding which philosopher one should follow, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or the schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism. There were even some who viewed the Emperor as the supreme example of what life within the Roman Empire meant and was about.

The interesting thing about audience conventions is that when we have the same assumptions as the author we clearly understand what the other is saying. However,

when we do not have the same assumptions we tend to scratch our heads in uncertainty. We find this specifically true in our modern world when it comes to oral communication. Someone can use a word, like "goulash," which the speaker views in a very positive fashion, while the hearer has negative connotations regarding that same word. This only leads to miscommunication. Are audience conventions really all that important? You be the judge.

One more assumption, or audience convention, should be noted particularly regarding ancient writings. The thought process behind a written document in the ancient world was an oral thought process. Due to the time and expense of writing very few drafts were provided except among the truly wealthy writers. In the modern world a document will go through numerous drafts and see the hand of various editors before it ever becomes a published work. Because of this process the way we hear a written document is important. The modern world normally listens, and therefore reads, in a linear fashion. We start at the beginning, we proceed through the plot, and we come to the end of the book. The only exception is when we read a mystery; then we frequently jump to the end before coming back to read the middle so we know whodunit. This is not so in the ancient world, rather the ancient world used various techniques to keep the audience, whether oral or visual, engaged in following the thought process of the writer. This was particularly important for writers and oral communicators because the vast majority of people, estimates are close to 90%, could not read at all. Documents like Paul's letter to the Romans were written with the intention that they be read aloud by a Cantor. It was particularly important that the writing style kept the listeners engaged.

Several techniques are utilized and will be mention throughout this book. The first

and perhaps best known is chiasm. Chiasm is described as a path that reaches the center and then retraces its steps. The common symbol used to denote chiasm's structure, $abcb'a'$, illustrates this path. Chiasm can have numerous patterns and levels of entry and exit, for instance the first 18 verses of John 1 have been structured with as many as 15 distinct levels. The pattern used by the author indicates the prime importance of the communication.

A second technique is inclusion although it is sometimes called ring composition. This pattern might best be described in mathematical terms where the use of parentheses signifies that distinct items are to be thought of as a unity. For example, $2+3-4 \times 6=6$ or -19 depending on how you form the calculations, but $(2+3-4) \times 6$ can only equal 6. Inclusion provides the signs and pattern to communicate that the reader should understand the section thus bounded as a single unit. Just as in mathematics one can have outer and inner parentheses and even a few brackets thrown in, so also a story from the ancient world may have what seem to us convoluted patterns that actually help interpret each other.

The main point of understanding these rhetorical devices is to realize that through Paul's use of genre, rhetoric, and audience conventions he communicates his thoughts and ideas to a first century audience. When a modern audience comes to read Paul's letter to the Romans they can either read it in a hermeneutic fashion in which case they supply modern meanings for all the words and ideas Paul uses that have been translated into English or they can attempt to read the letter exegetically, by searching out and understanding ancient writing techniques and patterns. The reader will observe that Paul does repeat himself, yet he usually repeats himself so the ancient

audience can follow where his presentation or so he can build upon and explain his idea. A modern reader of Paul can become frustrated at the many repetitions; when he circles back and when he picks ideas up in a bucket, because they want Paul simply to get to the point. This battle the modern reader engages in with ancient writing techniques is the struggle that ultimately helps one to understand Scripture.

Jesus as Example

One of the audience conventions that we mentioned was Jesus as the supreme example for life as those who live as a follower of him. This creates a difficulty in the first several chapters of Romans when, due to translation, the translator must provide an English preposition to a phrase that Paul uses, "*pistis Christou*." This has normally been translated as "faith in Christ," where the translator has provided the preposition "in" to the Greek words, faith and Christ. However, grammatically this phrase could just as easily be translated "faith of Christ," where the preposition "of" is provided to the two words. What did Paul mean by this phrase that is hotly disputed today among scholars? That is valid question, however, are we asking the question exegetically or hermeneutically? From the hermeneutic time frame most audiences would view this as no argument at all since they understand the phrase to mean that we are expected to have faith in Christ! However, there are some who understand that Paul presents Jesus as an example for believers to follow; therefore it is Christ's example of faith that is on display, leading to the translation "faith of Christ." Many who do not like controversy want to say, "can't it be both?" The answer is maybe but probably not.

At this point it is highly probable that you're asking the question, "is it possible for me to learn what Paul is trying to say in his letter to the Romans?" All these ideas about

genre, rhetoric, conventions, don't come easy for me, not to mention words like diatribe, midrash, and exegesis. Is there a reason to press through and study this writing in the New Testament? Well the answer is a powerful yes! Luke Timothy Johnson said in his commentary that Romans is "the most powerful argument concerning God in the New Testament." (17) He goes on to say that this letter is unmatched for its "theological profundity". Therefore if you really are interested in understanding God, the study of God, in all of its depth and difficulty, then Romans is the place you need to be.

In order to give you hope to continue let me summarize all of the theological profundity, and the powerful arguments concerning God made, in Romans. For Paul, the idea is truly simple — not simplistic — and can be summarized in the following three statements: (1) God is one, (2) God is fair, (3) to both the Jew and to the Gentile. That is the basic argument Paul is going to flesh out over 16 chapters of writing to a group of people in the year 58, many of whom he has never met, as he hopes to continue his calling as an apostle of God and take the message of the salvation of Jesus Christ to those inhabiting the Roman province that is in modern-day Spain.