

Apostolic Handbook Series

Handbook
on the
Epistles of Paul



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Romans

INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL SITUATION

Paul very much needed the Roman Christians' assistance: he had his heart set on evangelizing the as-yet-unevangelized Iberian Peninsula (Spain) (Romans 15:24). He also hoped that they would provide him with the necessary financial means to do so and a base from which to operate the mission. He seemed to have believed that his evangelization of Spain would finally bring about the "fullness of the Gentiles," which would then trigger the salvation of "all Israel." (See Romans 11:25–26; I Corinthians 4:9.) Once realized, God, having achieved His ultimate objectives, would bring history to its close.

PURPOSE

Paul's sense that Jewish salvation was now tied to the spread of the gospel to the ends of the world perhaps is the very reason the letter was written and accounts for both its urgency and carefully reasoned explanation of the Gentiles' surprising

role in bringing about the salvation of Israel. The community in Rome had not yet developed an understanding of the connection between God's ancient covenant with Israel and the recent events following the death and resurrection of the Messiah. The temptation for Paul would have been to procure their favor at almost any cost. He could have skirted the issue altogether and pandered to their ignorance and prejudice. But he did not. He was true to his revelation. He made the same radical claims in Romans that his opponents loved to seize upon; except that Paul patiently demonstrated from Israel's own Scripture that it was Israel's God, not Paul, who had, all along, been the radical, remaining faithful in the face of chronic human unfaithfulness.

THEMES

God's once hidden but now fully disclosed plan to include the Gentiles in His covenant. The Jews' final salvation. And the faithfulness of God in achieving both purposes.

COMMENTARY

1:1–5. “The gospel . . . promised afore by his prophets.” Once Paul established his identity and vocation in relation to Christ and His gospel, Paul created a chain of declarations, each of which was guaranteed by the declaration that followed. To begin at the end of the chain in 1:4, Jesus' “resurrection from the dead” confirms powerfully the truth of the preceding statement, namely that Jesus is the “Son of God,” having both God's divine nature (“according to the spirit of holiness”) and a fully human nature (“according to the flesh”) descended from David. Jesus' resurrection verifies the truth of the prophets' promises in the “holy scriptures.” And, in turn, the prophets confirm that the gospel Paul declared is indeed the “gospel of God.” It is important to note that Paul did not appeal here to the Scriptures in order to prove the authenticity of Jesus' resurrection: the Roman believers

were already convinced of the Resurrection. Instead, Paul's aim here, as it is throughout Romans, was to maintain the integrity of the Old Testament Scriptures in light of the Resurrection. The recurring questions that this letter addresses are: Has God, in embracing the Gentiles, turned away from the promises He made in Scripture to Israel? And, is the gospel that Paul preached, which has at its center the Resurrection, a gospel completely unforeseen by the prophets? Paul's opening words addressed these questions immediately: Far from repudiating the integrity of the Scriptures, the Resurrection actually fulfills God's promises to Israel.

1:5. "We have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations." For Paul, grace was the strength through which the believer carried a burden. Paul stated that he and his readers had received from Christ "grace and apostleship." "Apostleship" refers to Christians being "sent" (*apostolos* means, "one sent"); but "grace" refers to the power that God grants believers to carry out their calling. The term grace is too often thought to operate only within the realm of soteriology (the study of salvation). Grace has become almost synonymous with forgiveness. Following Luther and Calvin's interpretations of Paul, we may suppose that God, wanting to save us but being inhibited by His own holiness and a woeful lack of merit in us, solves the dilemma of our inadequacy by a kind of legal loophole or trick God plays upon Himself. Paul's idea of grace, however, bears little relation to such an interpretation. For Paul, grace was not even primarily a term referring to the forgiveness of sins; in fact, forgiveness is merely one of the many consequences that result from God's gracious nature. Instead grace speaks of the instrument of God's loving intentions toward the world He created. God gives the believer grace to overcome the difficulties of evangelizing and discipling, just as He gives grace to the sinner to overcome sin. In the phrase "grace and apostleship," then, apostleship is what God calls us to, and grace

is what God gives us from His own nature to fulfill God's loving intentions toward His creation.

1:9–16. “I am a debtor . . . I am not ashamed.” It may be difficult to grasp the emotional connection Paul obviously felt between the seemingly disconnected statements, “I am a debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians” and “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” Our tendency to isolate 1:16 from what precedes it (either by quoting only 1:16 or by starting a sermon's text with 1:16) is evidence of this disconnect. We often view 1:16 as the apex of Paul's argument, a thundering declaration suddenly interrupting the heretofore quiet meditations of his pen. But for Paul, the startling and bold declaration comes at 1:14, in which he declared himself a debtor to Greeks, barbarians, the wise, and the foolish. Even a cursory glance at what being “a debtor” would have meant to Paul will alert us to this. Until recently, being a debtor was a shameful thing. Today, our financial trustworthiness is based almost solely upon our willingness to be indebted. For instance, we will have a hard time buying a house without having a significant credit history. But in former times, being in debt was often viewed as evidence of moral depravity (for an interesting early modern illustration, see Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*). Paul's Jewish upbringing would have conditioned him to view debt as a particularly malicious form of slavery. It is in this light that we can see more clearly the significance that Paul attached to his confession of being a debtor. More surprising still, Paul referred to himself as a debtor to Gentiles. This is quite the reversal of all that Jewish history teaches us to expect. Jewish moneylenders were forbidden to charge interest to fellow Jews but were free to do so when lending to Gentiles. It is highly significant that Paul referred to himself as a debtor; in fact, his self-description should lead our minds back to the opening statement in Romans, “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ.” From the moment he became a believer, Paul went

through life behaving as if he were a slave, a member of the lowest social class—a position desired by absolutely no one.

The ancient world was highly stratified. A man's rank determined everything he said and did, right down to the color of the clothes he wore (sumptuary laws forbade the poor from wearing certain colors) and the pronouns he was allowed to use when addressing others. In this world, on behalf of a Lord who washed His followers' feet, Paul, in every encounter he had with another human being, no matter his or her social rank, freely chose to act, speak, and live as if he were that person's social inferior and servant. This becomes even clearer in another of Paul's letters with the words "in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves" (Philippians 2:3). What Paul expected of his fellow Christians was merely a reflection of how he himself behaved toward others.

This is an exceedingly tough act for human nature to pull off. We are tempted in every encounter with others, whether consciously or unconsciously, to position ourselves as the superior. We do this sometimes in obvious but at other times in very subtle ways. Being the superior, admittedly, has its advantages; it can procure instant admiration, honor, and protect us from the possibility of being ignored. In a typical encounter with another human being, we often find ourselves involuntarily flashing social badges of honor: signs of wealth, education, experiences, official titles, or the names of our famous acquaintances, all in our fragile psyche's desperate attempt to avoid the relational position that Paul, who felt that this position was the definitive mark of the follower of Christ, chose as a matter of course. Paul's debtor status, however shameful it might have been in the eyes of the world, was for him free of social shame. He was not ashamed because God, in Christ, had already turned the world's normative power structures on their heads. Where the ancient world expected any social change to be effected from the top-down, Jesus' humble status in life, His humiliation in

death, and His subsequent resurrection had all proved instead that God had chosen to bring salvation from someone whose social status was so lowly that He had been declared unfit to live and condemned to die the most shameful death of all: the death of the Roman cross (see fig. 3).

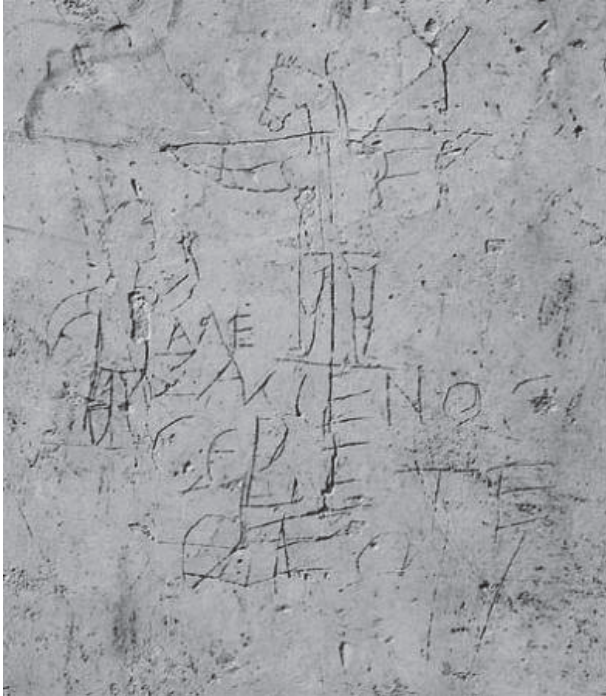


Figure 3. The so-called “Alexamenos Graffito,” an inscription recently unearthed on a buried wall near the Palatine Hill in Rome, dating from approximately AD 200. The inscription reads: *Alexamenos Cebete Theon* (“Alex worships his God”). The graffito depicts a Christian in a posture of adoration toward a figure with a donkey’s head on a Roman cross. The picture, which was meant to mock a Roman Christian, gives an indication of what early Romans thought of the God the Christians worshiped; it also provides a snapshot of the stigma that Christians bore in Rome. This depiction sets Paul’s words, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ,” in context.

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alexorig.jpg>

1:17a. “The righteousness of God.” Although Paul’s thoughts emanated from “Christ and him crucified,” his theology was clothed in the language of the Old Testament, specifically the *Septuagint* (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The phrase, “righteousness of God” (*dikaiosyne theou*), was often the basis of an Old Testament saint’s appeal to God to save His people from the wicked. Just as importantly, it was a phrase often uttered in hopes of a Day of Judgment, in which the Lord would once and for all punish the wicked and vindicate the just. For instance, Psalm 7:9: “Oh let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end; but establish the just: for the righteous God triest the hearts and reins,” and Psalm 9:8, “he shall judge the world in righteousness.” (See also Psalm 7:9; 35:24; 50:26.) For Paul, righteousness was not a “legal fiction,” an alien righteousness God “imputes” to the new believer so that the believer could possess a righteousness that she would otherwise lack. Instead, we should look to Paul’s Scriptures (the Old Testament) for what Paul meant by the phrase, for his use of the phrase is thoroughly traditional; he meant by “righteousness of God” essentially the same thing the psalmist meant by it. The only difference between Paul’s use of the term and the Old Testament use was the means by which Paul saw God’s righteousness being revealed and deployed: namely, through the gospel of Christ.

Many of the key terms Paul used here can also be found in one passage that seemed to be of particular importance in directing Paul’s missional theology: Isaiah 51:4–5. Here is the English translation of the Greek text that Paul would have read (which differs slightly from most Old Testament translations because translators often follow the Hebrew Masoretic Text instead of the LXX which Paul used):

Hear me, hear me, my people; and ye kings, hearken to me: for a law shall proceed from me, and my judgment shall be for a light of the nations (ethnon, “Gentiles”). My righteousness (*dikaiosyne*) speedily draws nigh, and my salvation (*soterion*) shall go forth as light, and in