

The Historical Context of Paul's Letters To the Galatians and Romans

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I. INTRODUCTION

Not many letters have had such a great impact on the western world as the letter of Paul to the Galatians. Indeed, this letter became the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation.¹ It has also been called the “Magna Carta of Christian liberty,” and this is truly an accurate description.²

On the other hand, Romans is generally regarded as the greatest of Paul's letters, and the Roman church became one of the major centres of Christendom.³

It is therefore not surprising to find that both these great letters are quite similar to each other in regard to their content.⁴ However, their occasion and purpose are quite different. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the audiences to which these letters were written, their purpose, and the historical circumstances which prompted them to be written.

II. AUTHORSHIP

1. *Galatians*

James Montgomery Boice notes: “Of the traditional Pauline books few have been so unquestioningly accepted as genuine as the Book of Galatians.”⁵ Indeed, Paul is mentioned by name as author in 1:1 and 5:2. The book is also listed as Pauline in the Marcionite and Muratorian canons.⁶

¹ J M Boice & A S Wood, *Galatians - Ephesians*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995).

² Ibid.

³ E F Harrison, *Romans*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1995).

⁴ F F Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1982) 2.

⁵ Boice & Wood, *Galatians - Ephesians*.

⁶ Ibid.

2. Romans

The first verse identifies Paul as the author of this letter, and there has been no serious challenge to this.⁷ From the postapostolic church to the present, with almost no exception, the Epistle has been credited to Paul. Harrison points out that if Galatians and 1 & 2 Corinthians are accepted as Pauline, then there is no reasonable basis for denying that Paul also wrote Romans, since it echoes much of what is said in those earlier letters.⁸

Note, however, that 16:22 indicates Paul did use a scribe.

III. DATE AND LOCATION

1. Galatians

The council of Jerusalem recorded in Acts 15 is dated to have occurred in A.D. 48.⁹ In light of the discussion at the council, the letter to the Galatians was most probably written just prior to it, since Paul would have undoubtedly used the decision of the council as a major argument for his defence in the letter.¹⁰

If this is the case, then Paul would most probably have written the letter in Antioch (cf. Acts 14:26-28).

2. Romans

Paul is apparently on his way to Jerusalem with the collection from the Gentile churches (15:25-26). Acts 20:2-3 states that Paul had come to Greece and stayed there for three months, and 2 Corinthians 13:1, 10 suggest that Paul stayed at Corinth whenever he went to Greece. Therefore, Paul probably wrote the letter in Corinth.¹¹ This is also suggested by Paul's commendation of Phoebe (16:1-2) who lived in Cenchrea which is adjacent to Corinth, and Gaius (16:23) may be the same person mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1:14. Also, Erastus (16:23) may be the same Erastus mentioned in an inscription as a city commissioner at Corinth.¹²

Cenchrea, the sea port adjacent to Corinth, is a less likely possibility. Paul would only have gone there to board a ship. But at this point in time there was a plot to kill him which forced him to change his plans (Acts 20:3). Therefore, it is unlikely that Paul had the time or peace of mind at Cenchrea for composing a letter like Romans. A Macedonian origin has also been claimed, with Romans 15:25 as support, but the verb *poreuomai* can also be understood futuristically: "I am about to go."¹³

⁷ D Moo, *Romans 1-8*, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991) 1.

⁸ Harrison, *Romans*.

⁹ G Ogg, *Chronology of the Life of Paul* (London: Epworth, 1968) 200.

¹⁰ D A Carson, L Morris & D Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1992) 294.

¹¹ Moo, 3.

¹² H J Cadbury, "Erastus of Corinth", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50 (1931) 42-48.

¹³ Harrison, *Romans*.

Acts 18:12 refers to Gallio, who arrived in Corinth in the summer of A.D. 51, when he began serving as proconsul of Achaia. After this Paul stayed in the city “some time” (Acts 18:18). Most probably the following year he went to Caesarea and Jerusalem, stopping at Antioch on the way back. Presumably, his return to Ephesus was in the beginning of 53, marking the beginning of a three-year ministry there (Acts 20:31). At the end of 56 he spent three months in Corinth (Acts 20:2-3), starting his final trip to Jerusalem in the beginning of 57. Therefore, the date of composition was most probably at the beginning of 57, just before he set off for Jerusalem.¹⁴

IV. INTENDED RECIPIENTS

1. Galatians

From the historian’s point of view, few NT books contain so many problems. There is no way of knowing for certain when the letter was written, where it was written, or even to whom it was written.¹⁵

The people who first became known as Galatians came from the barbarian tribal stock known as the Celts, or the Gauls. They invaded Macedonia and later Asia Minor in the third century B.C. In popular speech, these Gauls were distinguished from the West-European Gauls by the term “Gallo-Graecians,” from which the name “Galatians” comes. With the coming of the Romans, the territory of the Galatians was incorporated into a much larger Roman province to which the old ethnic name, Galatia, was extended. This province, established in 25 B.C., contained the districts of Lycaonia and Isauria as well as portions of Pisidia and Phrygia. In particular, the cities of Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Derbe and Lystra--cities Paul visited on his first missionary journey--belonged to it.¹⁶ By the first century, the province of Galatia stretched from Pontus on the Black Sea to Pamphylia on the Mediterranean.¹⁷

This raises the question of whether Paul’s audience was situated in original Galatian territory (North Galatia), or in Phrygian Galatia and Lycaonian Galatia (South Galatia)? Until the eighteenth century, no commentator ever seriously disputed the idea that Paul’s letter was written to Christians living in northern Galatia.¹⁸

If the recipients were living in South Galatia, they were probably the churches planted by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:14-14:26) in the Phrygian cities of Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, and in the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe.¹⁹ On the other hand, there is no record of Paul ever going into the north Galatian region,²⁰ yet he appears to be quite familiar with his audience.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Boice & Wood, *Galatians - Ephesians*.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Bruce, 5.

¹⁸ Boice & Wood, *Galatians - Ephesians*.

¹⁹ Bruce, 5.

²⁰ Boice & Wood, *Galatians - Ephesians*.

Paul couldn't have written to both areas, because the letter implies that the churches of Galatia were all founded at about the same time, but in the light of Paul's missionary journeys, this is impossible.²¹

The evidence is not conclusive, but mostly favours the south Galatian view.

2. *Romans*

Next to nothing is known about the circumstances surrounding the founding and early history of the church in Rome.²² However, it appears that Christianity came to Rome at an early date due to the frequent movement to and from Rome of officials, troops and merchants.²³

Since there is no mention in the letter or in Acts of any evangelistic mission to Rome, the church was most probably founded by Romans Jews converted at Pentecost (Acts 2:10) who subsequently returned to Rome.²⁴

Although this letter is the earliest reference to the Roman church, there must have already been a church there for several years²⁵ since Paul had heard about them and desired to visit them (15:23-24), and their faith was being reported "all over the world" (1:8). Even though Paul had never visited this church, he was clearly familiar with their situation.²⁶

At the time Paul wrote, the church was made up of both Jews and Gentiles and a significant portion (if not the majority) were Gentiles.²⁷ However, in regard to the actual audience, the letter appears to send out "mixed signals."²⁸ Werner Kümmel writes:

Romans manifests a double character: it is essentially a debate between the Pauline gospel and Judaism, so that the conclusion seems obvious that the readers were Jewish Christians. Yet the letter contains statements which indicate specifically that the community was Gentile-Christian.²⁹

The letter is simply addressed: "To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints" (1:7), which can obviously include both Jews and Gentiles. However, vv. 5-6 suggest that Paul's readers were called from "among all the Gentiles."

On the other hand, there are many verses which suggest a Jewish audience, including 2:1-3:8; 4:1; 6:14; 7:1, 4; 9-11; 16:3, 7, 11. However, the greetings in chapter 16 indicate that Jews were present but this does not necessarily mean the letter was addressed to them. Chapter 2 is a literary device and reveals nothing about the readers. The reference to Abraham as "our father" in 4:1 can simply refer to Paul and other

²¹ Ibid.

²² Harrison, *Romans*.

²³ C E B Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 16-17.

²⁴ Moo, 4.

²⁵ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 16.

²⁶ Cf. 1:8; 7:1; 11:13; 14-15.

²⁷ Cf. 1:13, 11:13-32, 15:7-12. Also see Moo, 12-13.

²⁸ Moo, 10.

²⁹ W G Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1975) 309.

Jewish believers, rather than the readers. In regard to being under the Law, Paul clearly includes Gentiles as being under the Law in some sense.³⁰

Although the letter appears to be a debate with Judaism (cf. 1:18-4:25), there is no reason why the audience must be Jewish Christians. Paul could be highlighting the basic issues separating Jews and Christians, in order to help Gentiles understand the roots of their faith. The Gentiles would also have had a great personal interest in these matters, since the Roman church most probably began in the synagogue, therefore the first Gentile Christians would have been “God-fearing” synagogue-goers. These people would be greatly interested in how the gospel related to their understanding of circumcision and the Law.³¹

Note also, that the argument about the place of the Jews in God’s plan (11:11-24) is directed at the Gentiles (11:13).³² Therefore, although the letter directed mainly at the Gentile believers, Paul appears to have written with the entire community in mind.³³

V. OCCASION AND PURPOSE

1. Galatians

Paul apparently received news that various people in the church were making trouble, causing confusion,³⁴ and agitating³⁵ others by stipulating that the Gentile converts strictly observe the Jewish Laws and practices, including circumcision and the observance of special days (4:10, 5:2-3). This teaching is denounced by Paul as a perversion of the gospel (1:7, 5:2-6). These trouble-makers probably tried to gain support by disparaging Paul, which resulted in hostility toward him.³⁶

The identity of Paul’s opponents is crucial to the interpretation of Galatians.³⁷ Historically, most conservative scholars have assumed that Paul’s opponents were Judaizers. However, this view does not explain the presence of verses like 5:13. This has prompted a number of alternative views which have arisen in the last seventy years.³⁸ Some hold that both Judaizers and Antinomians opposed Paul. Others see the opponents as gnostic/syncretistic Jewish Christians.³⁹ However, Walter Russell has concluded that the traditional view is indeed the correct one.⁴⁰ Indeed, the situation in Galatia appears to be very similar to the situation recorded in Acts 15:1. In one sense the trouble-makers were probably motivated by religious zeal, but also possibly to avoid persecution (cf. 6:12).⁴¹

³⁰ Moo, 11.

³¹ Ibid, 12.

³² Moo (10) notes that the 2nd person plural is used throughout vv. 14-24.

³³ Cf. 1:7 “To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints”

³⁴ Gk. *tarassontej*, 1:7, 5:10.

³⁵ Gk. *anastatountej*, 5:12.

³⁶ Bruce, 19.

³⁷ W Russell, “Who Were Paul’s Opponents in Galatia?”, *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-Sept, 1990) 350.

³⁸ Ibid, 329.

³⁹ Ibid, 330.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 350.

⁴¹ Bruce, 31.

Conservative Jewish teachers who were legalizers had arrived from Jerusalem claiming to be from James, the Lord's brother, and had begun to teach that Paul was wrong in his doctrine. They contended that Gentiles had to come under the law of Moses to be saved. It was not enough for them to have Christ; they must have Moses too. To grace must be added circumcision.⁴² Some of his enemies were even saying that he was not an apostle, and that the gospel he preached had not been revealed by God. (1:10). However, if the beliefs of these people prevailed, God's grace and the cross of Jesus Christ would be emptied of all value (5:2-4).

As the apostles pushed out into largely Gentile communities and the gospel began to take root there, questions arose regarding a Christian's relationship to the law of Moses and to Judaism as a system.⁴³ But Paul had preached that salvation is never to be gained by any amount of conformity to rules and regulations, even God-given regulations.⁴⁴ Therefore, Paul wrote this letter to reprove legalism and regain the Galatian churches.⁴⁵

Paul replies that (1) his teaching is not dependent on other human authorities -- this is what makes him an apostle -- for the teaching of an apostle must come directly from God, (2) his authority had been acknowledged by the other apostles whenever they had come in contact, and (3) he had proved his worth by remaining firm at Antioch when others, including even Peter and Barnabas, had wavered.

Paul then goes on to argue that circumcision is nothing (5:4) and what really counts is faith in Christ (2:16, 20; 3:8-26) and becoming a new creation (6:14-15).

2. Romans

Passages such as 1:1-15 and 15:14-16:27 indicate that Romans is an occasional letter, but unlike Galatians, Romans contains no urgent polemic.⁴⁶ In fact, Paul never explicitly states his purpose, although he does state that he has written on some points by way of a reminder (15:15). Cranfield comments: "...it is surely quite clear that Paul did not have just one single purpose in mind but rather a complex of purposes and hopes..."⁴⁷

It is highly unlikely that Romans is a complete summary of Paul's theology. Indeed, there are a several major themes which Paul writes about in his other letters that are missing from this letter.⁴⁸ Therefore, Douglas Moo suggests it is a tractate letter, outlining a general theological argument or series of arguments.⁴⁹ In addition, Russell argues that Paul was really only an "incidental theologian." He was much more concerned with evangelism and church-planting, and only delved into theology when His missionary work demanded it. Therefore, Paul's letters should be viewed from a

⁴² Boice & Wood, *Galatians - Ephesians*.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Bruce, 2.

⁴⁷ C E B Cranfield, *Romans* vol II, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979) 815.

⁴⁸ For example, the church as the body of Christ, the parousia and Christology. See Moo, 15.

⁴⁹ Moo, 15.

missiological, cross-cultural reference point, rather than a theological, conscience-oriented one.⁵⁰

Most scholars accept that at least part of Paul's purpose in writing was to prepare for his mission to Spain. Because Spain is so far from his base in Antioch, it would create many logistical problems, so Paul was probably trying to gain support from the Roman church⁵¹ and set up a base similar to that in Antioch. Paul wanted to journey to Spain with their blessing, their interest and their support.⁵² If this was to be realised, he needed to share with the church a complete exposition of the gospel he had been preaching for over twenty years.⁵³

In addition, Paul intended to visit the Roman church in the near future (15:22-25), so it is quite likely that he would have given them prior notice of his plans. Cranfield also suggests Paul specifically wanted to ask them to pray for himself, and for the acceptance of the collection by the Jerusalem church (15:30-32).⁵⁴

Helmut Koester understands the purpose as follows:

The letter had to be written to include the Romans Christians in the universal event of the progress of the gospel, which included the delivery of the collection to Jerusalem as well as the mission in the far west; both are explicitly mentioned and joined together as a unity.⁵⁵

Russell summarises the situation nicely:

Paul desperately wanted the Roman believers to take a strategic part in God's universal harvest of the nations and their own unity was the platform from which they could launch out in ministry. Paul's personal circumstances seem to have underscored this urgency. Given Paul's age (mid to late 50s), his poor health due to persecution and suffering (2 Cor. 11:23-30), and his many enemies, he surely knew he would not live long enough to see the western part of the empire evangelised. So that task needed to be spearheaded by the church in Rome. This body of believers must be persuaded of their responsibility and motivated to follow Paul in fulfilling it.⁵⁶

Note, however, that the basic problem for all interpreters of the letter to the Romans is the question of how to integrate 1:17-15:13 with the rest of the letter, which appears to have a straightforward purpose.⁵⁷

The relationship between Jews and Gentiles is a major issue.⁵⁸ Apparently there were some serious racial tensions in the Romans church, and these tensions appear to go both ways: The Jews saw themselves as superior to the Gentiles and treated them with contempt. This in turn, incited the Gentiles to persecute them.⁵⁹ This was a major threat

⁵⁰ W B Russell, "An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans", *Bibliotheca Sacra* (April-June, 1988) 180.

⁵¹ Moo (17) points out that the use of $\rho\rho\epsilon\mu\epsilon\tau\eta\kappa\alpha\iota$ in 15:24 alludes to this.

⁵² Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 23.

⁵³ Harrison, *Romans*.

⁵⁴ Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 815.

⁵⁵ H Koester, *History and Literature of Early Christianity* vol 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 142.

⁵⁶ Russell, "An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans", 182.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 175.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 176.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 181.

to the church's testimony, unity and effectiveness, and to Paul's potential support. Therefore, Paul not only writes against the Jewish Christians' insistence on strict observance of the Law, but also against Gentile arrogance and indifference toward the Jewish minority.⁶⁰

The detailed discussion of the uniqueness and specialness of the Jews in chapters 9-11 is not an excursus. Rather, it is concerned with "the issue of continuity in God's salvation plan and, consequently, of God's faithfulness to His promises."⁶¹ This discussion was relevant to both Jews and Gentiles, since it concerns the question of God's faithfulness to His promises.⁶² Barrett writes:

...chs. i-viii are not so much concerned with an 'experience of salvation' as with the character and deeds of God who is the source of salvation, and chs. ix-xi are not at all concerned with Paul's patriotic sentiments but with the character and deeds of God who elected the Jews and now calls the Gentiles.⁶³

In fact, this letter was written at a time when anti-semitism was particularly rife in the Roman empire.⁶⁴ The Jews were expelled from Rome by order of the emperor Claudius in about A.D. 49.⁶⁵ According to the historian Suetonius,⁶⁶ by "disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus." Since the confusion of "i" and "e" was not unknown in Latin renditions of Greek, it is possible to conclude from this statement that the Roman Jews had become unusually agitated and disorderly over the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ (Christus), provoking the emperor to take action against them.⁶⁷ But by the time Paul was writing to the church (most probably early A.D. 57), the Jews had come back to Rome, but now found themselves to be in the minority, and it is quite likely that the Gentile Roman Christians looked down on them with disdain.

Therefore, as Russell comments:

...Paul challenged the Roman churches to participate fully in God's present harvest of all peoples by showing that their ethnocentrism opposed God's eternal plan of justifying people by faith, of giving them new life in the Spirit, and of mercifully placing them in His redemptive plan.⁶⁸

VI. CONCLUSION

In his letters to both the Galatians and Romans, Paul makes it clear that circumcision and conformance to the Law are not part of the gospel of Christ. Therefore, those who preach these requirements are perverting the true gospel. A person gains salvation not through trying to uphold the Law, but through faith in Jesus Christ. This requirement means that salvation is on offer to all people -- Jews and Greeks.

⁶⁰ Moo, 19.

⁶¹ Ibid, 27.

⁶² Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 19.

⁶³ C K Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 175.

⁶⁴ Russell, "An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans", 181.

⁶⁵ See Cranfield, *Romans* vol I, 16.

⁶⁶ *Claudius* 25

⁶⁷ Harrison, *Romans*.

⁶⁸ Russell, "An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans", 180.