'Romans: Paul's Final Answer'

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The Reasons for Romans

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FOREWORD

Although much has been written, not only about Romans, but also specifically about the purpose of the letter, I feel, rightly or wrongly, that the last word has not yet been said or written on this topic. This short study is an attempt to contribute to that ongoing study, not to end it!

I have tried, in the interests of intelligibility, and of publication costs, to make this as far as possible a non-technical, non-esoteric work, and hope thereby that as many as possible of those interested in the subject-matter may find its ideas intelligible; at the same time I hope that some of my colleagues may find at least something of profit within its pages, even if my notes and my references to others’ views have been kept to a minimum.

Finally, especial thanks are due to Professor Ernest Best for reading through the typescript of this work and for many helpful comments on it, including the privilege of a preview of a small section of his forthcoming Paul and His Converts (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), and also to Ms Gail Mackie for assistance in the preparation of the text, to John Riches for kindly accepting this volume for publication in the series ‘Studies of the New Testament and Its World’, and to Dr Geoffrey Green and Ms Elizabeth Nicol of T. & T. Clark for all their friendly help and encouragement in seeing the text through the press.

St Andrews
A.J.M. Wedderburn
THE ENIGMA OF ROMANS

Why Paul wrote Romans is still something of an enigma. There is as yet no consensus as to why Paul should write precisely this letter with these contents to this church at this moment in his, and its, history. A taste of the argument that is still going on over this question can readily be gained from the short selection of essays edited by Karl P. Donfried, *The Romans Debate*; there one finds the views that this letter was primarily written to the church at Ephesus (T. W. Manson), or that Paul knew very little of the situation in the Roman church and wrote what he wrote more in the light of his own situation and of his reflections upon his previous arguments with his churches in Galatia and Corinth (G. Bornkamm), as well as the view that Paul is more interested in what he is going to say on his impending visit to Jerusalem (J. Jervell), or that we should assume that Paul wrote to deal with a specific situation in Rome until this should be shown not to be the case (Donfried himself), and others besides.

More recently much the same impression of a prevailing uncertainty on this matter can be gained from the survey of suggestions offered which is given by Dieter Zeller in one of the latest in the series of Romans commentaries that steadily flow from the presses. He mentions for a start the view of Günter Klein (also translated in Donfried's volume) that Paul is seeking to establish a properly and apostolically founded church in Rome; yet Zeller rejects this, for clearly Paul regards the Roman Christians as indeed Christians. Nor, in his view, are the conflicts between the 'weak' and the 'strong' in chapters 14 and 15 an...
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explanation for the letter (pace H. W. Bartsch and W. S. Campbell), for Paul is defending, not Jewish Christians (the identification postulated for the ‘weak’), but the people of Israel against the arrogance of gentile Christians. Nor is it enough to see him as contending solely against the exclusive claims of Jews (but contrast F. C. Baur, O. Kuss and A. Suhl), for that is equally one-sided. Nearer the truth for this scholar is the suggestion that Paul’s previous struggles and his present position explain the polemics of Romans: he resists antinomianism because of his experiences with the Corinthian church, and not because of Jewish-Christian accusations (so Campbell, W. Drane and B. N. Kaye), but yet he deals with Jewish Christian opponents too (3.8), which supports the view of Romans as an ‘apology’ directed towards the Judaizing opponents who dogged his heels (so Kettunen). Against the view of Bornkamm, Jerwein and U. Wilckens that Romans was conceived as a speech to be delivered in Paul’s defence in Jerusalem Zeller doubts whether the Roman Christians would have spotted the connection between the intercession for the acceptance of the collection which Paul requested of them (15.30-1) and the treatment of Paul’s gospel sketched in the letter. Or is it that Paul’s visiting card has grown into this impressive document because the Romans were to share in the missionary expansion which he announces in 15.24 (cf. G. Schrenk, Zeller, Judith, and Kümmel, ‘Probleme’)? For the gospel which they were to assist in proclaiming was a controversial one, and one which Paul must justify to himself as well as to others. In the end, however, sure-footed and learned as this account may be, and incisive in its sifting of the various options suggested, the very plethora of suggestions and alternative perspectives offered may leave even the experienced student of Paul with a feeling of frustrated bewilderment.

That there should be so much disagreement over the purpose of Romans is disconcerting in a letter that has perhaps received more learned attention and research than almost any other piece of literature in human history. (It was, after all, the appearance of yet another ‘popular commentary’ on this letter in particular that provoked one reviewer to wonder whether a ‘temporary moratorium’ should be declared on such productions? that a commentary on this letter should provoke this comment was no coincidence in view of the steady stream of such works that was flowing out from the presses at that time; and more have appeared since!)

Not that this attention to this single letter is misplaced; far from it. If the influence of Paul’s thought on subsequent centuries has been considerable – as it indeed has – then no other letter of his has contributed more to this influence than the Letter to the Romans. This is aptly and eloquently illustrated by F. F. Bruce’s article on ‘The Epistles of Paul’ in the revised edition of Peake’s Commentary on the Bible: when he wished to point to the significance of these letters and of the role which they had played in Christian history and thought, it was almost exclusively to the influence of this single letter alone to which he turned for his examples – the conversion of Augustine through the words of Rom 13.13b -14, that of Luther through his studies of, and lectures on, this letter, and that of John Wesley in turn through hearing the Preface which Luther wrote to it, as well as the impact upon twentieth century scholarship of Karl Barth’s commentary on Romans (p. 927).

Yet this same centrality of the letter only makes it the more disconcerting that the circumstances that occasioned the writing of Romans are so disputed. For it has come to be widely recognized that Paul’s letters are in large measure to be understood in the light of the context in which they were written. J. Christiaan Beker puts it thus: ‘Paul’s thought is geared to a specific situation and ... his arguments cannot be divorced from the need of the moment’ (Paul 25). It follows that to understand what Paul is saying in any of his writings one needs to know as much as possible what that ‘specific situation’ and that ‘need’ were. But it is precisely the answers to those questions which are disputed in the case of Romans. It is small wonder, in view of the importance and centrality of the letter in our understanding of Paul, that some scholars try, as we shall see, to make an exception in its case, but it needs to be asked whether such an exception can legitimately be made.

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That was recognized as early as 1836 by the great Tübingen scholar, Ferdinand Christian Baur, in an article on the purpose and occasion of Romans. He had to contend with those who treated the letter as a general one, a doctrinal treatise, not rooted in the particular circumstances of the Roman church, an approach which, it will be seen, still has its advocates today. Rightly Baur argued that the onus of proof was on those who thus treated Romans as so different in kind from all the other Pauline letters; if all the other letters of Paul were addressed to a particular situation in the recipients’ church, why should Romans be an exception? Paul’s grasp of the gospel did not sit there ready-made in his head, waiting to be delivered to the world, but was shaped as he responded to events in the church. Rather ‘it is utterly inconceivable that the apostle should have regarded himself as required to write a letter with such contents to this church unless there were certain specific circumstances which obtained in the Roman church, if not exclusively, at least to a greater degree than in any other church’ (‘Zweck’ 68=156). Here he must have faced a stronger challenge to his message, a challenge which Baur finds in the claim of Jewish Christians in Rome that the gentiles could have no part in salvation until the nation of Israel enjoyed it; this challenge underlies the whole letter, but above all chapters 9-11.

It was recognized in the ancient world that letters were like one side of a conversation, and today the comparison is often even more appropriately made with a telephone conversation, for in that case the bystander can usually only hear one side of the conversation and is left to guess the context and the meaning of what is overheard—often a puzzling and tantalizing business! Moreover we are in the position of overhearing from another room, so to speak, for we cannot see the changes of expression and the other visual signals which often help to convey another’s meaning and to interpret his or her utterances. Nor can we, unlike the person at the other end of a telephone line, get information from the tone of voice employed by the partner in the conversation (if the line is good enough to permit that!). In that respect the recipients of Paul’s letters were no better off than we are, for he communicated with them in writing. At least they usually had the advantage of oral communication by the bearers of Paul’s letters, who must often, if not always, have had some knowledge of the contents of the letters, and may well indeed have been entrusted by Paul with further explanation of, and commentary upon, what he had written. Moreover the recipients usually knew Paul personally, and this was probably true even of some of the Roman Christians, as we shall see.

Thus the modern interpreter of Paul’s letters stands there listening to one end of the various conversations which Paul had through his letters with various churches throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and he or she has to guess on the basis of what Paul says all that is being said or done at the other end of the lines, so to speak. If our understanding of what Paul is saying in each of his letters is indeed to a great extent commensurate with our knowledge of the other side of the conversation—i.e. who the recipients of the letters were, what they were saying, doing or experiencing, what they had told Paul or what he had been told about them—and if this knowledge is in the case of Romans either not accessible or is at least disputed, then our understanding of what Paul is saying in Romans is of necessity flawed, uncertain and provisional.

For that reason it is undoubtedly most desirable to achieve as clear an insight as possible into the reasons for Paul’s writing in these terms. However, many previous attempts to explain why he wrote Romans have been flawed by being partial or one-sided. For any adequate explanation of the writing of Romans has, in my opinion, to do justice to at least six factors, (1) both the letter-frame, the beginning and end of Romans which give it the formal characteristics of a letter, and the body of the letter which is contained between that opening and that ending, (2) both Paul’s situation and that of the church to which he was writing, and (3) both the fact that Paul’s arguments in the body of Romans seem to have Jewish criticisms of his message in mind and the fact that at times he plainly seems to be addressing himself to Christians who are not Jews (1.13; 11.13; probably 1.5-6). In doing justice to all of these we shall in fact find that no one, single reason or cause will adequately explain the writing of Romans; rather the explanation
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is to be found in a constellation or cluster of different circumstances, each contributing in its own way to the writing of the letter and thus to our understanding of it; hence I have deliberately chosen the plural 'reasons' in the title of this study (contrast, however, Zeller, Juden 40).

In the first instance, then, we shall consider, negatively, examples of partial explanations of Romans which fail to do justice to all of these six factors together, and shall see something of the implications of, and problems presented by, such neglect, before going on, positively, to attempt to do justice to all six in the following chapters.

1. Romans as a Letter

In the case of the Letter to the Hebrews it has been remarked that it lacks the customary opening of a letter, although it may end like one; as a consequence W. G. Kümmel concludes that it 'shows no epistolary character at all'; rather it is a 'discourse' or treatise (Introduction 2: 397-8). There have not been lacking those who have in effect treated Romans similarly despite the fact that it obviously possesses the formal characteristics of a letter, both at its beginning and at its end.

Thus, for instance, the Reformer Philip Melanchthon in an often quoted phrase described Romans as a 'compendium of Christian doctrine'; this is hardly satisfactory, for, after all, there are aspects of Pauline, let alone Christian, doctrine, which are not covered in Romans, and even more which are only touched on, but are not developed; there are even important issues handled in earlier letters, but not discussed here, such as the questions of eschatology and resurrection dealt with in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15. Yet despite this some commentators and scholars in the present century have continued to treat Romans as if it were a doctrinal treatise; Beker accuses both Barth and Nygren of this (Paul 65): the former in his Preface to the first edition of his commentary states that, although 'Paul, as a child of his age, addressed his contemporaries', he considers it 'far more important that ... he vitally speaks to all men of every age' (p. 1); the latter argues that

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to offer as the real explanation of the letter the accidental circumstances, of a more personal character, which supplied the occasion for its writing, does not contribute to the deeper understanding of its contents; but quite to the contrary. ... the epistle ... impresses one as a doctrinal writing, a theological treatise, which is only externally clad with the form of a letter. ... Romans does not deal, or deals only in slightest degree, with the conditions within the Roman congregation. But it is nevertheless a real letter. ... Instead of the special problems of the congregation at Rome, we confront Paul's own life problem (Romans 6-8).

Ulrich Luz, too, who had earlier blamed recent attempts to explain Romans on the basis of a particular concrete situation for failing to make sense of the letter as a whole (and especially chapters 1-8, but often also 9-11), argues that Romans differs from all Paul's other letters in being a coherent exposition of the position which Paul had reached in his disputes with his churches. The subject-matter discussed in it is the key to understanding its structure, not the specific circumstances which occasioned it ('Aufbau' 162-3).

And yet justice should not be done to 1.18-11.36 at the expense of 1.1-17 and chapters 12-16, but to both parts of the letter. Yet the list of those espousing such views as Luz's or similar ones could—regrettably—be extended.

The view of Luz that Romans primarily expounds the conclusions reached in earlier arguments with churches other than that of Rome echoes the conclusions of T. W. Manson and G. Bornkamm in the articles mentioned at the start of this chapter. There the latter describes Romans as Paul's 'testament' (the English translation adds 'last will and' to the title of the article for good measure) — despite the fact that, as Bornkamm grants, in writing Romans Paul plainly did not expect to die, but rather, despite the risks involved in his forthcoming trip to Jerusalem which he mentions in 15.31, he expected to be brought safely to Rome to fulfil his long-held ambition to visit the church there (vv 23-4). Rather, for Bornkamm, Romans is an 'unintended' testament (p. 30) — his last
literary achievement, for in fact Bornkamm regards Romans as the latest extant letter of Paul’s; and even were any of the other letters later this would not, he argues, alter the character of the letter. For, unlike Manson, Bornkamm denies that Romans is a ‘mere report and record of former controversies’ in Galatia and Corinth (p. 25); rather this great document ..., summarizes and develops the most important themes and thoughts of the Pauline message and theology and ... elevates his theology above the moment of definite situations and conflicts into the sphere of the eternally and universally valid (p. 31).

(This detachment of Romans from ‘definite situations’ is only increased by his belief, expressed in his book Paul, that Paul’s information about the state of the church at Rome was meagre—p. 89.) Yet does this not raise the question why the Roman church, which Paul had neither founded nor even visited before, should be singled out as recipients of ‘this great document’? And after all, if Paul did not intend Romans to be his ‘testament’ and was not indeed in a position to envisage it as such, then to describe it in this way does not further our understanding of why he wrote it; we may regard it as his ‘testament’, but he could not have.

The term ‘testament’ could also be one way of describing the literary form of Romans, but one which I have argued is inappropriate. It is, however, far from being the only attempt to describe its form, nor is that surprising in view of the amount of interest evinced in recent years concerning the formal characteristics and types of letters in the Graeco-Roman world and the relation to them of the letters of the New Testament and in particular those of Paul. Small wonder, then, that attempts have been made to classify Romans according to the various types of letter current in that period.

One such attempt is Martin Luther Stirewalt’s appendix to Donfried’s The Romans Debate on ‘The Form and Function of the Greek Letter-Essay’. He groups together into this category of writings the letters of Epicurus, of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, ‘selections from the works of Plutarch’, 2 Maccabees and the Martyrdom of Polycarp. Klaus Berger, too, sees a particular analogy to the New Testament letters in general in those Graeco-Roman letters in which a teacher writes either to individual pupils or to communities of pupils or even to certain cities (‘Gattungen’ 1338-9). Yet he recognizes, too, the distinctiveness of Romans, for there Paul does not write as a ‘ruler’, as it were, to his subjects, but to a church of which he is not the apostle (at least not in the sense that he founded it; but see below), and the tone is correspondingly more that of a more general tractate (ibid., 1334-5).

Stirewalt describes such ‘letter-essays’ as follows: they were written to particular recipients and on specific subjects; yet they were intended to be read by others apart from the addressees. This class of writings is not as wide as that of the didactic letter, for that classification could include school exercises and other fictional letters which lack a genuine letter setting. This group of writings does have in common, however, the fact that each of them in some way supplements another writing, usually by the same author, or ‘substitutes for a work projected by him, and the idea of instruction is presented in the author’s purpose to clarify, abridge, aid in memorizing, defend his thesis, recount history’ (pp. 176-7). Yet, although clarification or defence of a thesis, in this case the gospel Paul preaches, may be an apt description of at least part of what the apostle is doing in writing Romans, it is by no means clear that this letter is meant either to supplement some other work or to act as a substitute for it; it is at most a substitute, for the time being, for Paul’s actual presence in Rome. Anyway, such a proposal does not really explain why Paul chose this moment to write this letter, however much it may look like a more general tractate, to the Roman Christians, nor is it at all certain in this case that he also had a wider audience in view. Moreover to describe it as an ‘essay’, even with the prefix ‘letter-‘, might prejudice decisions yet to be made about the relation — or lack of it — of its contents to the actual situation of the Roman Christians.

Another attempt similarly to fit Romans into one of the categories of ancient letters is Robert Jewett’s description of it as an ‘ambassadorial letter’ (‘Romans’). This he sees as a more satisfactory explanation of its character than either regarding it as a treatise or ‘the situational theory’ (ibid. 6). And yet it is not a pure
example of this type, but a ‘unique fusion’ of this type with other sub-types like the paraenetic letter, the hortatory letter and the philosophical diatribe. Now it is true that Paul’s tone and present situation could well be described as those of an ‘ambassador for Christ’ (cf. 2 Cor 5.20), but is Romans any more ‘ambassadorial’ than his other letters? True, the ‘ambassador’ has in this case yet to set foot in the place where he must present his credentials and presents them in advance, as it were, but it is doubtful whether there was a ready-made model of a letter for such a situation; after all the ambassador would usually present his credentials in person and by word of mouth, and if letters were involved they were written by another on the ambassador’s behalf. And anyway, even if there had been such a form of letter, it would hardly do to think that Paul plucked such a form out ready-made from amongst the arsenal of available literary models, for who did this except either those seeking to write exemplary materials to be admired or imitated or their pupils?

These attempts to throw light on Romans by defining its literary form seem to me to underline the appropriateness of John L. White’s general advice that we should not have it as our primary aim to establish which category of ancient correspondence is most closely related to the New Testament letters. Similarly we could argue that it will not greatly advance our understanding of Romans to place it within this or that category of epistolary types. Rather, White argues, it is important to treat the New Testament letters as letters, and to establish as best we may the purposes which letters serve and what means ancient writers employed in order that their letters might serve such functions (Light 218). He earlier described three broad purposes that letters served—conveying information, making requests, enhancing or maintaining personal contacts with the recipient(s) (ibid. 197). Letters generally might combine one or more of these functions. That is certainly arguably true of Romans, for, although it does not employ precisely those formulaic expressions which he selects as typically employed in Graeco-Roman letters for these three functions, this letter does at various points clearly exhibit all three functions:

(a) Paul is concerned to convey information (cf., e.g. 1.13, ‘I do not wish you to be ignorant that...’; 11.25);
(b) he makes requests (e.g. 15.30; 16.1–2, 17, 19);
(c) he seeks either to maintain or to promote good relations with the recipients, depending respectively upon whether he already knows them or merely hopes to meet them shortly when he visits Rome (e.g. 1.6–15; 16.3–16).

But these are very general observations, and so we still need to ask what information Paul was conveying and, above all, why there is no indication that the Roman Christians had asked him for it nor even that news had reached him of circumstances in the Roman church, in contrast to the situation in the case of a letter like 1 Corinthians. And what requests does he make and, again, why? And we even need to ask what the relations are between Paul and the Roman church in general, and whether they are good ones that are merely to be maintained, or whether they are less favourable than he would desire and so are in need of repair.

But all that presupposes that it is in fact the Roman church that Paul is writing, and that can no longer simply be presupposed. So this brings us to yet another question to which we must, at least briefly, pay attention, for it is vital for this study: was the Roman church the intended destination of this letter?

2. The Destination of Romans

According to Romans 1.7 the letter is addressed to the church in Rome; the omission of the words ‘in Rome’ in that verse are, if not accidental, probably to be regarded as ‘made in order to show that the letter is of general, not local application’ (the explanation given by Bruce M. Metzger, Commentary 505, of the reading adopted in the 3rd edition of the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament); possibly this represents the earliest attempt to make of Romans a general letter divorced from a particular historical context.

But even if the letter as we have it in the vast majority of manuscripts is unmistakably addressed to Rome, that fact has not prevented scholars from suggesting that the primary recipients of
it, those to whom Paul addresses it in the first instance or those of whom he is really thinking as he writes it, are elsewhere than in Rome. Either such scholars argue that Paul wrote it originally for another church and then sent a copy of it, or of part of it, to Rome, or they argue that while writing it to Rome Paul in fact has his eye on an audience elsewhere.

The prime example of the former interpretation is the essay of T. W. Manson referred to above. The suggestion had been made as long ago as 1829, by David Schulz,7 that chapter 16 was directed to the church at Ephesus; that suggestion was made on the basis of the contents of that chapter, but Manson now sought to give both confirmation and precision to that suggestion by using textual evidence, namely the evidence of Papyrus 46. For the manuscript tradition of Romans shows remarkable variation in the position of the doxology of 16.25 -7, placing it either in its present position or after 14.23 or in both places or omitting it; Papyrus 46, however, is unique in placing it only at the end of chapter 15; we now know, too, that minuscule 1506 has it at the end of chapters 14 and 15 and does not contain 16.1-23. Manson seized on the evidence of the papyrus as the sole textual grounds for his thesis that Romans had once existed in a 15-chapter form; this, he argues, was the form which Paul sent to Rome and the full 16 chapters were sent to the church at Ephesus in whose midst Paul had worked for a considerable time. Manson initially suggested that Paul wrote Romans 1-15 and sent this letter to Ephesus, with chapter 16 added (in Donfried, Debate 13); however, in the conclusion of his article, he proposes that Paul in fact works out his statement of the conclusions of his arguments in the controversy that occupied him from the time of 1 Corinthians to that of Philippians 3, and sends it to his friends in Ephesus since he did not intend to visit them on his journey to Jerusalem; at the same time he had the idea of sending a copy to Rome with a statement of his future plans (ibid. 15). Thus Romans becomes primarily a letter to Ephesus and only secondarily to Rome; as a consequence Romans ceases to be just a letter of self-introduction from Paul to the Roman church, and becomes a manifesto setting forth his deepest convictions on central issues, a manifesto calling for the widest publicity, which the Apostle did his best — not without success — to give it (ibid.).

Essentially Manson therefore succeeds in doing the same thing to Romans as the scribes did when they excised ‘in Rome’ from 1.7 (and in 1.15 in two witnesses): he makes the letter a general statement and one not related to any particular issues in the Roman church, nor, for that matter, to any in the Ephesian church either.

For a long time it has been widely accepted that chapter 16 was indeed not part of the original letter to Rome and there are still those who hold this view (e.g. Walter Schmithals). Yet, on the whole, the pendulum of scholarly opinion now seems to have swung back towards the view that this chapter was part of the letter to Rome; in the German-speaking world the recent commentaries of Wilckens and Zeller regard it as such (cf. also W. H. Ollrog), and in the English-speaking world this is argued in the authoritative study of Harry Gamble on The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans. This is of considerable importance to us here, since, if Romans 16 with its extensive list of greetings sent to persons known to Paul, or known of by him, is part of the original letter to Rome, then the supposition that Paul knew little of what was going on in the church there becomes far more difficult to sustain. Such extensive knowledge of who was in the church there is in itself impressively detailed knowledge of this aspect of the life of the church in Rome and indicates that Paul’s lines of communication with it were functioning quite well.

What are the arguments for and against Romans 16’s being part of the letter to Rome? Originally, we saw, the case for an Ephesian destination was made out on the basis of the contents of the chapter:

(1) The long list of greetings is unparalleled in Paul’s letters; some compare the far shorter list in Col 4.10-18, but, even if that letter were Paul’s, the names are chiefly of those who send greetings, not of those who receive them. It was argued that this list is strange if Romans 16 is sent to a church which Paul has not visited, but this might be countered by the argument that this in
fact makes excellent sense as a forging of links with a church where Paul is not known personally to all or even to the majority of the members of that church; the unknown apostle can show them that he is not so unknown after all, at least to some of them, and some of them are not so unknown to him either; the higher the standing and the greater the influence of those whom he knows or knows of, the more influential in gaining the respect and regard of the Roman church this catalogue of greetings becomes; it is a classic example of 'name dropping'! Where chapter 16 addressed to the church at Ephesus the contrast between this long list of greetings and the absence of such greetings to named individuals in letters sent to other churches which Paul had founded and which he had also visited more than once and where he had also worked for extended periods of time would be striking; for there Paul does not single out individuals in his greetings - perhaps because to select only some would be invidious, and to greet all by name would use up too much time and writing materials.

(2) Rom 16.3 greets Prisca and Aquila; we are told in Acts 18.2 that they originally came from Rome, but had, along with other Jews, been expelled from that city by the Roman emperor. Acts, it is true, says 'all' Jews in Rome were expelled on this occasion, but the numbers that would probably have been involved casts doubt on the accuracy of this; Kettunen (Abfassungszweck 75) estimates that there were at least 30,000-40,000 Jews in Rome before Claudius' edict, and others put the Jewish population around 50,000; the Roman historian Dio Cassius states that in 41 Claudius deliberately refrained from expelling them because of their numbers (60.6.6), and it is hard to believe that numbers as large as these could easily have been expelled eight years later. Anyhow, Prisca and Aquila came to Corinth where they met Paul and worked with him; subsequently they moved to Ephesus (Acts 18.18-19; 1 Cor 16.19; cf. 2 Tim 4.19). But it is the argument of Wolfgang Wiebel (in Donfried, Debate 111), amongst others, that Claudius' measures had been repealed by the time of Nero's accession in 54 C.E. and that Jews then began to return to Rome in great numbers; certainly by the time of writing Romans Paul for his part felt free to visit the city despite the fact that he was a Jew (was Claudius' ban at least one of the factors that had prevented him visiting Rome earlier? ~ 1.13; 15.23), and this surely implies that Claudius' measures, if not repealed, were at least no longer in force. So had Prisca and Aquila too returned to Rome by then (probably in 57-58 C.E.)?

(3) Less compelling evidence is the mention of the presence of Epaenetus, the 'firstfruits of Asia', i.e. the first Christian convert in that province or among the first converts there (16.5); even if it would be only too natural to find him in the church at Ephesus, the chief city of the Roman province of Asia, it might also be all the more worthy of mention if he was now to be found amongst the members of the Roman church.

(4) It is surprising that 16.17-20 issues so sharp a warning against troublemakers, since polemics of that sort have earlier been strikingly absent from the letter, but they would conceivably be appropriate in a letter addressed to Ephesus, for Paul could address that church with the authority of one who had worked there. (Yet the fact that they only occur right at the close would surely imply that either the bulk of the letter was indeed directed to another church and another situation or that chapter 16 was originally an independent short letter.) Yet perhaps such a change at the very close of a longer letter is possible, particularly if Paul had, as Gamble suggests (History 93-4), penned the last chapter or part of it himself. Moreover, as Markku Kettunen notes (Abfassungszweck 71-2), such sharp changes of tone are paralleled elsewhere in Paul's letters (he gives as instances 1 Cor 16.22; Phil 3.18-19; 1 Thess 2.15-16), and Paul's language (quite naturally) tends to become sharper when he turns to deal with troublemakers external to the church to which he is writing.

Paul's acquaintance with, or knowledge of, so many people in a church that he had never visited is not hard to explain. Trade and commerce would have brought him news of the church there and of those in it, particularly its leaders; trade and evangelism would have taken thither many whom he had known in Christian churches further to the East, for business of many sorts took great numbers of people to that city; so the Roman historian Tacitus deprecatingly referred to the arrival of Christianity in Rome by
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remarking that into that city everything hideous or shameful flowed together from every side (Ann. 15.44).

Moreover, although some of the names mentioned in chapter 16 seem, at least at first sight, to point towards an Ephesian destination, others if anything point to a Roman one, as Gamble notes, following J. B. Lightfoot (Phil 175):

(1) The mention of the household of Aristobulus (16.10) was held by Lightfoot to be a reference to the grandson of Herod the Great who lived in Rome; he was a friend of Claudius and, although he was dead by then, his household may well have retained his name, perhaps having been bequeathed to the emperor and having remained as a distinct entity within the imperial household and still known by its former master's name (so Gamble, ibid. 50, and Lightfoot, ibid.). Lightfoot finds it no coincidence that Paul immediately goes on to greet a Jew, Herodion, 'whose name ... we might expect to find among the slaves or freedmen of a distinguished member of the Herodian family' (ibid.).

(2) The household of Narcissus (16.11) may be that of Claudius' former freedman; true, he too had died by then, shortly after his master, but his household also may have been absorbed into the imperial household, not so much by bequest this time as by confiscation.9

(3) In a forthcoming study on Paul and His Converts Ernest Best argues that Romans differs in certain respects from those letters which Paul wrote to churches in which he had himself evangelized: he does not call on the readers to imitate him, which is readily intelligible if most of them had never seen him. He avoids the parent/child imagery, presumably because they were not his 'children', so to speak, and does not call them to obey him, but rather to obey Christ and the gospel. He never reminds them of things which he has taught them previously. His more frequent use of the 'diatribe' style (see chapter 3 n. 2 below) with its imaginary interlocutors is particularly appropriate in a letter to a church which he does not know, for elsewhere he can argue directly with his readers (150-1; but compare Schmeller, Paulus esp. 407-8).

THE REASONS FOR ROMANS

On the question of the textual evidence cited by Manson and mentioned above, it must be noted from the outset that no witness gives direct evidence of a 15-chapter version of Romans, with the possible exception, also noted above, of the minuscule 1506, dating from 1320. But Kurt Aland warns us against seeing this witness as another testimony to the same tradition as Papyrus 46; rather it is a late modification of the 14-chapter version of Romans. Strikingly, Aland notes, the text runs through to 15.33 with 16.25-7 inserted after 14.23, then leaves a half page blank, and then has 16.25-7 once again; the gap seems to indicate that the copyist knew the rest of chapter 16, but decided to omit it ('Schluß' 297). Nor, moreover, is Papyrus 46 direct evidence of a 15-chapter Romans, for the doxology at the end of chapter 15 is followed by 16.1-23.

Certainly the variation in the position of the doxology in the manuscript tradition of Romans remarked on above is most easily explained by postulating the existence of various abridged versions of a Romans that originally contained 16 chapters; a 14-chapter Romans seems to have circulated fairly widely (cf. Gamble, History 16-33), and Origen of Alexandria, writing in the third century, attributed such a truncation of Romans to the second century heresiarch Marcion (Rom 10.43 in Migne, PG 14, 1290AB). It is, however, rather puzzling that Marcion should have found this whole section of Romans in particular especially uncongenial to his theology, if Irenaeus of Lyons is correct in reporting that he removed from Paul's letters all that plainly spoke of the Father of Jesus Christ as the God who made the world, and all that showed the coming of Christ to have been prophesied in the Old Testament (Haer. 1.27.2=1.25.1 Harvey). One could think of parts of Romans even more unsuitable in Marcion's eyes if he used these criteria. If 15.8 and 15.25-28 were sufficient reason for Marcion to delete the entire chapter, as Aland argues ('Schluß' 294), then one might have expected little of the letter to have survived his surgery if he had been consistent - but perhaps his consistency should not be assumed. But may it not rather be that, as Gamble suggests (History 100-14), Marcion inherited an abridged version of Romans which had already been shortened for
other reasons? However Gamble's own suggestion that this abbreviation was part of a catholicizing of the text of Romans is not altogether satisfactory either, for one could imagine that 15.13 or 15.21 would be more appropriate points to insert the editorial knife if one wanted to prune away that part of Romans that spoke to a particular church situation. In other words, none of the suggested explanations of the existence of a 14-chapter Romans seems wholly satisfactory. The deletion of chapter 16 alone, i.e. a text ending at 15.33, could have occurred either as a catholicizing editing or, more simply, as a purging away of what seemed largely a list of names, a purging that took place simply in the name of brevity; after all, some might have found the greater part of that chapter somewhat barren in profound or eminently edifying material. None of this suggests, however, that either a 14-chapter or a 15-chapter Romans was ever anything but a later, secondary abbreviation of an original 16-chapter letter.

Yet the nature of this problem is such that these arguments are not, and cannot be, conclusive, but they strongly suggest that it is better to assume that Romans 16 is indeed part of the original letter and that it was directed to the church at Rome. That tells against any theory that the letter originally existed in a longer (16-chapter) and a shorter (15-chapter) version, and it also implies considerable familiarity on Paul's part with the situation in the Roman church.

That brings us to the other possibility mentioned above, that Paul did indeed write Romans to the church at Rome, but that he wrote to them with his eye on a situation elsewhere; that is to say that, although he ostensibly addresses the Romans, the audience whom he in fact envisages in his mind's eye is another one.

Ernst Fuchs argued that it was in fact Jerusalem which was the 'secret addressee of the Letter to the Romans' (Hermeneutik 191). For M. J. Suggs Romans was 'a brief drawn up by Paul in anticipation of the renewed necessity of defending his gospel in Jerusalem' ("Word" 295), and Bornkamm argues that Paul not only writes Romans in the light of his past experiences, but also 'has in mind the impending important meeting with the mother church in Jerusalem and the rounding off of his work as an apostle' (Paul 96). For Ulrich Wilckens too the arguments of Romans are those to be presented in Jerusalem, for which he seeks the Roman church's approval ('Abfassungszweck' 167), but it is clear that primarily he is speaking only of the first eleven chapters. But above all the article by Jacob Jervell in Donfried's The Romans Debate announces this by its very title, 'The Letter to Jerusalem'. Jervell asserts that it is 'the major presupposition for an understanding of Romans ... that one frees oneself from the idea that a Pauline letter is primarily determined by the situation of the recipients' (p. 64). Yet that, we may note, is not to say that it then follows that it is not determined at all by the recipients' situation. Jervell, however, goes on to assert that

The essential and primary content of Romans (1:18-11:36) is a reflection upon its major content, the 'collection speech', or more precisely, the defense which Paul plans to give before the church in Jerusalem (ibid.). So Romans is 'primarily directed to Jerusalem, but also to Rome because Paul needs this congregation', or at least he asked them 'for solidarity, support, and intercession on his behalf' (ibid. 64-5). He is, though, not asking support for his future missionary endeavors in Spain. True, he is expressing hope for some aid – probably in terms of food and lodging – so that he will be able to continue his journey after his stay in Rome (15:24). But he is not specifically requesting such aid. Therefore, that is not the reason for his writing; nor would it explain plausibly his extended remarks in the main section, viz., 'first to the Jews and also to the Greeks' (ibid. 66).

He never mentions that he intends to make Rome a base for his missionary work in the West as Ephesus and Corinth served him in the East. Nor is Romans just a summary of what Paul intends to say in Spain – it omits too much of Paul's customary teaching as we know it from other letters. Rather it is concerned with problems that are of particular relevance to Jerusalem. Whereas Galatians dealt with 'justification by faith apart from works of the law' the theme of Romans is that 'the righteousness of God is revealed through faith apart from the law, first to the Jews, then to...
the Greeks and at the end to all Israel' (ibid. 69). This is not a
debate with the Roman church, but it deals with objections which
Paul anticipates in Jerusalem. He seeks the aid of the Roman
church—a church that belongs to his domain, for he is the apostle
to the gentiles; it should be on his side as he goes up to Jerusalem
with the collection for the church there.  

There is much in Jervell's analysis of Romans that is of great
value, but there is one important strand in the letter to which it
does not, and cannot, do justice: Paul sides with the 'strong' in
faith (15.1) who are apparently able to rise above such legal
observances as attaching significance to particular days (14.5) or
concern with certain foodstuffs (14.2, 6); the kingdom of God for
him too is not a matter of such observances (14.17); the division
of food into the ritually 'clean' and 'unclean' is superseded in Christ
(14.14). None of these assertions are likely to win approval or
favour with the Jewish Christians under James the Just in
Jerusalem with their zeal for the Jewish Law (Acts 21.20). But it is
in keeping with this identification of himself with the 'strong' who
thus discard those sorts of ritual obligations that were the
hallmark of Judaism when Paul in 11.13-24 addresses himself to
the branches of the wild olive, to use the terms of his image in that
passage, who have been grafted on to the stock of the cultivated
olive tree; they are, he tells them, not to despise the branches that
have been cut off from that cultivated tree, for the latter's very
nature fits them even better to be grafted on again. Rather they
themselves should take care, for God could even more easily and
fitly prune them off too.

Such a line of argument makes no sense addressed to the
Jerusalem church, but makes excellent sense addressed to the
Roman church and to what is, as we have seen, a predominantly
gentile church. That they need to have this warning given to them
will, however, also be of considerable significance when we come
to evaluate the situation with which Paul is dealing in the Roman
church.

But first it is appropriate to look at Paul's situation when he
wrote Romans before we consider that of the Roman church, for
the former is more generally agreed both to be more clearly
described in Romans and to be relevant to our understanding of
the letter.