

Preface

The question may be raised: Why another book on Romans? “Of making many books there is no end” (Eccles. 12:12, RSV), especially books on Romans. Nevertheless, I propose that we add this book to that number for these reasons. First, its purpose is to help those studying Romans to understand the nature of what it is they are studying. It provides a fresh look at Romans and issues related to its interpretation. It challenges the idea that doctrinal themes are guiding the narrative. For too long we have regarded Romans as a book of doctrine merely to be analyzed. We have failed to realize that both the doctrinal and exhortation passages were written to address pressing issues in Rome. Those issues were driving the narrative. The interactive rhetoric was guiding the narrative.

Second, it pulls together arguments for the view that Romans is a letter addressing major circumstances in Rome. The surface structure of the letter points to the issues being addressed. The issues concern circumstances in Rome of major consequence. They are primarily twofold: (1) the precarious nature of living as Christians in Rome and (2) the strained relationships between Jews and gentiles.

Third, it challenges the consensus that Romans is a letter-“essay,” that the bookends (1:1-17 and 15:14-16:27) have the markings of a letter while the body should be viewed as an essay. This follows a long line of tradition that the body reflects Paul’s own concerns, his desire to introduce himself to the church in Rome in line with his coming visit, to preserve his theology and gospel, and so on. Hence,

what we see in the body is theology and a progression of themes unrelated to circumstances in Rome. Proponents argue that the body of Romans lacks interactive discourse with the recipients; thus it is an essay. Contrary to this majority view, I find that the body of the letter is quite interactive with its readers. Its rhetoric, grammar, and extensive use of questions and groups of questions with embedded epistolary formulas combine to make the body of Romans an interactive letter. When Romans is treated as an essay and structured on the level of ideas, the flow of Paul's dialogue is obscured. Such outlines fail to account for Paul's "bold" (15:14) and disruptive rhetoric. But when Romans is treated as a letter, Paul's dialogue becomes engaging as we witness how his gospel addresses the issues facing Roman believers.

Fourth, commentators have overlooked and/or misinterpreted Paul's use of questions and answers in Romans. They have viewed the question-and-answer passages primarily as a means of answering critics or entering into a discussion with an imaginary person. They hold that Paul, while writing Romans, was heavily influenced by a literary convention (genre) known as Hellenistic diatribe. Such diatribe was used by philosophers and teachers with their students. The consensus is that Paul used diatribe as a literary device to aid his internal argument. The entire body of the letter (chaps. 1–11) is structured around the objections and false conclusions from such interlocutors. This understanding of the rhetoric is not only wrong, but also contributes to Romans being viewed more as theological argument than as interactive discourse relating faith to life. Rather, I hold that Paul's extensive use of questions and answers in chapters 2–11 serves to guide the narrative and to point to the underlying circumstances that were driving the narrative. The question-and-answer format helps us realize how the parts of the letter fit together as a whole.

Fifth, this book also takes issue with the premise that Paul, though writing primarily to a gentile constituency, is actually engaged in a debate with Jews. This premise supports the view that Paul is involved in defending himself, his doctrine, or his gospel. Romans is not involved in such a debate.

Sixth, as stated above, this author agrees with the minority position that Paul is primarily addressing circumstances in Rome. Paul is using bold language to exhort gentile believers in Rome to be at one with their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ. He is also addressing their precarious life existence in Rome. The circumstances in Rome are striking. The church is young, has already gone through persecution, and is about to go through severe persecution. Jewish believers are in the process of returning to Rome following their expulsion in 49 CE, and there are internal relationship issues that need to be resolved. That is precisely what Paul is addressing, and he does so by lifting up the Jews before their fellow believers. He also takes pains to show how the gentiles are now joined to the Jews as the people of God.

Finally, understanding the relational and acoustical effect of the letter's rhetoric and grammar is essential for interpretation. Paul was writing a letter that would be heard orally by the believers in Rome. That interactive rhetoric would be guiding them through the letter. That interactive rhetoric is the key to the organization of the letter. Any outline or structure we impose should conform to that interaction. In addition, Paul was very careful as to how he wrote the letter. It took time to dictate such a long letter and to do so with an amanuensis. He had plenty of time to think of how he would state each sentence as well as frame the entire letter. He was trained to think carefully in order to communicate orally. By this time in his life, approximately sixty years of age, he had an extensive repertoire from which he could draw. The words he used and thoughts he had came from a lifetime of communicating the gospel. For this reason, I believe Paul was very careful even in the placement of words orally for his audience. This is why I have sought to provide a more literal translation of passages in Romans, especially the questions in chapters 2–11. I would add that while the translations are my own, I always compared my translations with other translations that (1) were done by committees of scholars and (2) were primarily word-for-word translations. Paul also had to frame his letter (which was quite long by standards of that day) in a way that would guide his readers through its content. The letter would

be read to the believers in Rome. How would Paul keep their attention and lead them through the content of such a long letter? He did so in an interesting way, a way that provided an oral map for the believers as they listened to the letter being read. I would also suggest that that same oral map served as a mental outline for the apostle to follow as he dictated the letter.

Why did Paul begin the body of the letter with a description of the ungodliness of humanity? Why did Paul focus on the Jews and their advantage? Why did Paul spend a whole chapter on all believers being part of the lineage of Abraham? Why did Paul focus on the importance of being “in Christ” and living “in the Spirit” and the Spirit dwelling in believers? Why did Paul plea passionately for the Jews in chapters 9–11? Are any of the exhortations in chapters 12–15 aimed at addressing specific circumstances in Rome? All these questions can be answered once we understand the rhetoric of the letter and the circumstances in Rome toward which the rhetoric is directed. This is why I focus on the structure of the letter. Its structure is found in the rhetoric used by Paul, and the rhetoric is driven by the circumstances of the recipients.

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