

## **INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERPRETING ROMANS**

This is an abbreviation of a large commentary that was published in the *Hermeneia* series in 2007. Although I received the commission in 1980 and was supposed to complete the commentary by the end of that decade, I had actually been studying Romans since 1955. From the beginning I found Romans to be the most difficult of all of the Pauline letters to understand. The short commentaries that I wrote in the 1980's were far from satisfactory<sup>1</sup> and it was not until two decades later that I could have explained what I thought Romans was about. Therefore the most effective way I can clarify the challenge of interpreting this letter is to describe some of the viewpoints I have been forced to revise over the past half century.

The most troubling of these challenges was the slowly emerging awareness that the dominant paradigm for interpreting justification by faith as individual forgiveness of sins was not supported by the actual wording of Romans. Although every commentary on my shelf followed the Augustinian scheme of justification as individual forgiveness, Halvor Moxnes broke this tradition by showing that the word fields of "honor, dishonor, shameless, be ashamed, put to shame, glory, glorify, praise, boast and boasting" were actually more central in Romans. This focus on honor and shame related to the central purpose of the letter as Moxnes understood it, "to bring together believing Jews and non-Jews in one community."<sup>2</sup> This meant that Paul was seeking to overcome shameful exclusion, which could not be accomplished by forgiveness, which was in any event a secondary issue that appears only in 3:25 and 4:7. As I worked more seriously with the Greek text of Romans, I found more and more categories that did not match the standard interpretive scheme: the socially discriminatory categories of "Greeks and barbarians, educated and uneducated" in 1:14; the twenty-eight appearances of the potentially shameful epithet "Gentiles;" the categories "weak" and "strong" employed in 14:1-15:7; the twenty-five references to social gestures of honor in the form of "welcome" and "greeting" that dominate the last three chapters; and the 70 references to "righteousness," "make righteous," etc. that are often mistranslated as "justification," and were usually interpreted in terms of individual forgiveness despite the lack of direct evidence. It was excruciating to discover that my own interpretive tradition from Luther, Wesley, Barth and Käsemann was not supported by the vocabulary of this letter. I was facing the absolutizing of a Reformation doctrine, but for a long time didn't know what to do about it.

In place of the traditional theology of Romans that concentrated on individual guilt and forgiveness for failing to live up to the law, I gradually recognized that the central issue was setting the world right by overcoming its perverse systems of honor and shame. Conversations with colleagues led me to begin thinking about the honor culture of ancient Rome, Greece, and Israel as the arena for this reinterpretation, but my theological tradition provided scant resources in this direction. A study of modern films dealing with issues of honor and shame<sup>3</sup> began to open the door to a theological and emotional understanding that my Wesleyan tradition gave me no basis to grasp. Grappling with the element of shame implicit in crucifixion was crucial in this slow process of rethinking the heart of Paul's baffling letter.

The text critical issues were also baffling because after abandoning my early adherence to the theory of Romans 16 as a series of greetings to Ephesian friends attached to a copy of the letter to Rome, the relevance of these greetings remained unclear. None of the commentaries on my shelf related these details to the argumentative thrust of the letter as a whole. The details about the congregational situation in chapters 14-15 also seemed contradictory, and no reconstruction of that situation actually threw any light on the theology of forgiveness that was supposed to animate the whole. None of this seemed to relate to the Spanish mission that the letter appeared to support, and no commentary threw light on this

because the Spanish context was nowhere even discussed. After reading the article by W. P. Bowers<sup>4</sup> that demonstrated the lack of Jewish presence in Spain, it gradually became clear that Paul's missionary strategy had to be reconceived, but how this related to the argument in the letter was at first totally unclear. I began reading about the cultural situation in the Roman colonies on the Spanish peninsula to clarify what Paul might have had in mind.

For years I tried to understand the letter on the basis of ancient epistolary theory, but found that the concept of the "body" of a letter threw no light on the complicated organization of the argument in this sixteen chapter letter. Then I read Hans Dieter Betz's commentary on Galatians that pioneered in the rhetorical analysis of Pauline letters<sup>5</sup> and began studying classical rhetoric with colleagues at Northwestern University. I soon discovered that part of my confusion came from following the tradition of assuming that Romans was a defense of the true gospel, which placed this letter in the judicial type of rhetoric. This produced hundreds of discrepancies that no commentary seemed to explain, and I decided that Wilhelm Wuellner was correct to see the letter as fitting the demonstrative type of rhetoric,<sup>6</sup> which I then discovered included ambassadorial speeches and letters. If Romans was designed as an ambassadorial letter, this meant that Paul was seeking to find common ground between different theological and cultural groups in Rome, whose diversity was evident in the previously baffling details of chapter 16.

When I began to take account of the rhetorical evidence, there was a basis for revising my earlier skepticism about whether the details in chapter 16 support the creation of a coherent profile of the weak and the strong in 14:1—15:13.<sup>7</sup> If Paul's discourse is demonstrative, the profile can be understood as abstractly drawn so as to depict extreme positions in opposite directions, within which a wide range of congregational viewpoints could be encompassed. In 14:2, for example, Paul writes that "the one has faith to eat everything, while the weak person eats leafy vegetables," but in fact no group in the ancient world was totally indiscriminating in food consumption, and no group was so extremely ascetic as to eat only lettuce. The exaggeration on both sides is humorous and rhetorically effective in supporting an argument that pertains to a wide range of controversial positions on diet and liturgy that divided the Roman congregations. In 14:5 Paul describes the controversial positions with regard to holy days in such generic terms that a wide range of alternative distinctions is encompassed: "Now the one person judges one day better than another, while the other judges all days [alike]." Rather than specifying that this formulation pertains to Sunday worship, Sabbath observances, Jewish festivals, fasting times, lucky days, or Roman feast days, the appropriate conclusion is that Paul intentionally formulated the matter so that a number of controversies would be covered. In 14:14 it is clear that the controversies over food relate in part to kosher regulations.

The references to these groups "despising" and "judging" each other in 14:3 and 10 can be understood as contrary strategies of mutual shaming, the one typical for conservative legalists and the other for liberals, but the precise source of either law or freedom is intentionally left undefined. Hence the pejorative terms "weak" and "strong," which were obviously promoted by the group in the dominant position, are generic terms that encompass theological as well as social diversity. It is likely that the majority of the strong were Gentile believers, with Jewish liberals such as Paul and his close allies included in this group. It is also likely that the weak included Jewish adherents to the law, but this group probably included some Gentiles who had been close to synagogues before becoming believers. This analysis of the abstract generality of Paul's discourse allows some fresh interpretive resources to relate Paul's argument to present day groups of conservatives and liberals who judge and despise each other in similar ways.

The evidence in Romans 16 also led me to revise my view of the social structure of the Roman congregations, which has a bearing on how Paul's letter would have been understood. In 16:3-5 he greets his colleagues Prisca and Aquila and "the church in their house," which

matches the consensus that early congregations met in the homes of patrons who provided leadership and resources. However, Paul greets four other congregations that are not meeting in patron's homes; I refer to these as "tenement churches." In 16:10 Paul greets "those belonging to Aristoboulus," an expression indicating that the patron is not a believer but that some slaves and freedmen/women in his household are "in the Lord." The group greeted in 16:11, "those belonging to Narkissos," indicates the slaves or employees of a patron who is himself not a believer. In my exegesis of 16:3-16, a case is made that these two groups are parts of the imperial bureaucracy, probably meeting in the building where they work. In 16:14 another group is identified as "the brothers," who are together with five named leaders. Since all five names are characteristic for slaves, freedmen, and lower class Greeks, it is likely that this group consisted entirely of persons with low social status. The five persons named are probably the charismatic leaders of the community, and there is no indication that one of them is playing the role of patron. In the light of Peter Lampe's research,<sup>8</sup> this group is likely located in one of the tenement buildings of Trastevere or Porta Capena. In 16:15 Paul greets a congregation of "saints" that is led by five persons whose Greek names are associated with slavery. Again there is no indication of patronage in this early Christian cell that is probably meeting in a slum building. No one of the five persons mentioned in these two groups appears to have a position of prominence over the others. The leadership pattern appears to be collective rather than hierarchical.

So who provides the economic support, the resources for the Lord's Supper, and the means for hospitality and charity characteristic for early Christianity in such a community? The system of love-patriarchalism that was typical for house churches would certainly not be relevant in a group of slaves and former slaves residing in a densely packed tenement building. Some other system of support must be implicit in these references, and I suggest the category of "agapaic communalism" to describe what seems to be taking place. Moreover, it appears clear that the class structure of the groups greeted in 16:10, 11, 14, and 15 was one-dimensional. In contrast to house churches that have an upper or middle-class patron along with his or her slaves, family, friends, and others, these four cells consisted entirely of the urban underclass, primarily slaves and poor freedmen/women. Lacking a patron who would function as a leader, the pattern of leadership appears to be egalitarian in tenement churches. The complicated social structure of the five groups Paul greets in Romans needs to be taken into account as we interpret the letter.

I have tried to take account of the rhetoric designed to address this complicated audience. I view this letter as a magnificent example of evangelical persuasion. In ancient rhetoric there were five means of persuasion: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, all of which are evident in Romans. But a sixth element needs to be taken into account: the audience. Ancient theorists assumed that speakers were acquainted with their audiences, and thus developed no theory to ascertain their nature and proclivities. In the case of Paul's letters, we are forced to reconstruct what he perceived about the audience. This is why I have spent so much time piecing together the evidence about the situation of the congregations in Rome. The first means of persuading this audience, "invention," includes citations from early Christian creeds, hymns, Scripture, and formal arguments based on Jewish and Greco-Roman models. The "arrangement" of the letter begins with a formal introduction (1:1-15) and a thesis (1:16-17), followed by four extensive arguments (1:18—4:25; 5:1—8:39; 9:1—11:36; and 12:1—15:13). Each of these arguments contains ten paragraphs, which are most easily identified in the translation at the end of this volume. The letter concludes with a peroration (15:14—16:16 + 16:21-23). This carefully designed arrangement is matched by some elements of "style," such as the tenfold sequences in 8:38-39 and 12:10-13, the fivefold sequences in 2:17-23, 8:24-25 and many other places, and the sevenfold series in 3:10-18, 12:6-8 and so forth. Since fives, sevens and tens are sacred Jewish numbers, these features point to the legitimacy of Judaic preferences, a significant

issue in a letter that seeks to overcome the prejudice of a Gentile Christian majority against a Jewish Christian minority.

The rhetorical tools of “delivery” and “memory” point to the crucial importance of the oral presentation of the letter to the various congregations in Rome. In view of the fact that ancient letters in Greek were written without spaces between words or punctuation, the discernment of the numerical sequences and other stylistic features would have been very difficult for anyone reading the letter aloud for the first time. Classical rhetoric taught the techniques of preparing texts for public delivery and for the actual delivery itself, including the tone of voice and gestures suitable for different occasions. In the Greco-Roman world, speaking without notes was preferred, and students were taught to memorize their speeches before delivering them. What moderns would view as prodigious memory was not unusual; Seneca the Elder claimed, for example that he could recite two thousand names in the same sequence that were spoken to him once, and Quintilian reported that his teacher could recite a vast quantity of poetry, even when he had heard it only once. The key question in interpreting Paul’s letter is therefore how it would have sounded to its intended hearers, and what kind of participation would it have evoked. The attention to the stylistic details of the text of Romans throughout this commentary is therefore not an exercise in rhetorical abstraction but an effort to understand Paul’s aim to make an oral impact on the congregations in Rome. The hypothesis in this commentary is that the letter was designed to be presented to the Roman congregations by Tertius, mentioned as the scribe in 16:22, who would have been aware of these details from the moment of dictation.

All of these issues were rendered more challenging because Paul’s letter to the Romans turned out to be the only biblical writing for which no comprehensive bibliography was available. I spent years in libraries around the world attempting to assemble such a bibliography, which is still not complete. My hope was that scholars in other traditions would have insights to resolve some of these questions, and indeed to some degree this has occurred. So a commentary that was supposed to be finished in 10 years required 26, plus a final 13 months of checking references in ancient texts and so forth. It has taken me another six years to decide how to abbreviate the commentary for this publication in 2013, making some corrections along the way. But as we all recognize, slowness is no guarantee of truth.

The unusual discourse in the commentary you are about to read is the product of this process of reinterpretation. The basic idea in my interpretation of each verse and paragraph is that Paul is seeking to persuade the Roman congregations to support his mission to the barbarians in Spain. This required that the gospel of impartial, divine righteousness revealed in Christ be clarified to rid it of prejudicial elements that were currently dividing the congregations in Rome. In the shameful cross, Christ transformed the honor systems that dominated the Greco-Roman and Jewish worlds, resulting in discrimination and exploitation of barbarians as well as in poisoning the relations between the congregations in Rome. The gospel offered grace to every group in equal measure, shattering the imperial premise of exceptionalism in virtue and honor. Each verse is interpreted as Paul’s attempt to persuade and transform the Roman congregations for the sake of this mission to Spain, which Paul believed would contribute to the pacification of the entire world. Part of our challenge in interpreting Romans is that Paul was executed before he could engage in this final mission, which means that the fulfillment of his vision of global conversion beckons to later generations for its advancement.

The commitment to interpret Romans in the light of Paul’s mission and his understanding of the situation in Rome leads me to be skeptical that the theological tradition from which I come should be the decisive element in my interpretation. Each of our theological traditions is inclined to see the high point of the letter in sections where our theology seems best articulated. For example, Lutherans have usually seen the high point in chapter 3, the Methodists in chapter 8, and the Calvinists in chapters 9-11. In traditional

commentaries dissonant details in other sections of the letter are discounted or reinterpreted in ever more complicated hermeneutical efforts, which render Romans commentaries complex and obscure. The result is that an anti-imperialistic letter comes to be overlaid with unacknowledged ideologies with imperial claims. Isolated portions of the letter are presented as embodying the theology of particular traditions, now reified under the canonical aegis of the apostle to the Gentiles, and hence rendered authoritative for all others. The transforming gospel about God's righteousness regaining control of all disobedient persons and institutions by overturning their guises of superior honor is thus domesticated into support for one side or another in long-standing theological battles, with various kinds of culturally conditioned, hegemonistic agendas inserted into the interpretive process. The message of Romans is thus transformed into a new kind of theological law, producing bondage just as inexorably as Paul argues it always does.

This commentary is therefore fully earnest in the claim that the theological climax of Romans comes at the point of the rhetorical climax, in chapter 16, which no theological tradition has ever claimed as its banner. Paul urges the congregations and leaders in Rome, who have been discriminating against each other in violation of the gospel of grace, to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16a) as legitimate members of Christ's family. When the interpolations of 16:17-20 and 16:25-27 are eliminated, as documented in the final chapter of this commentary, the blessing of 16:24 properly concludes the letter with inclusive grace to both the weak and the strong: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be *with you all*. Amen." In reflecting on what this would have meant for the original audience of Paul's letter, we discover challenges for our own time as well.

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<sup>1</sup> *Romans*, in the "Genesis to Revelation Adult Bible Series;" *Romans*, in the "Cokesbury Basic Bible Commentary" Series.

<sup>2</sup> Moxnes, "Honour and Righteousness in Romans," 64.

<sup>3</sup> Jewett, *Movies: Triumph over Shame*

<sup>4</sup> Bowers, "Jewish Communities in Spain," 395-402.

<sup>5</sup> Betz, *Galatians*.

<sup>6</sup> Wuellner, "Paul's Rhetoric," 330-51.

<sup>7</sup> Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms*, 42-48.

<sup>8</sup> Lampe, *Paul to Valentinus*, 65-66.