

## **The Impact of the Edict of Claudius on the Book of Romans**

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Aside from Jesus himself, perhaps no one has had a greater impact on the development of Christian theology than the Apostle Paul. Nearly 2,000 years after they were written the Pauline epistles are central to Biblical theology; helping to interpret the law, history, prophets, gospels and more. Paul's writing comprises nearly half of the New Testament.

When studying Pauline theology several influences are considered; among these influences are the teachings of Jesus, the teachings of Moses, Paul's personal experience as a Jewish person and the situational and historical context to which Paul is writing.

Regarding the issue of situational and historical context, it is evident that many of Paul's epistles are addressing specific theological and social issues that were relevant to the readers. For instance, in the Corinthian epistles Paul confronts divisions (1 Cor. 3, 6 and 11), immorality (1 Cor. 5), and immaturity (1 Cor. 3, 12 and 13) among other issues that existed in the Corinthian church. In Galatians Paul confronts Judaizers that were trying to convince the fledgling church that practices like circumcision were still necessary to live in covenant with God. The heresy that precipitated the writing of Colossians can be reconstructed to reveal elements of asceticism and gnosticism. The Thessalonian letters were written to encourage faithfulness in the midst of persecution and to correct eschatological errors. The letters to Timothy and Titus were written to encourage and instruct pastors. Each epistle had a context and a purpose and each epistle is best understood in light of its context and purpose.

It is the situational and historical context of the book of Romans that will be the primary focus of this paper. While Romans is a substantial theological treatise, it is also an epistle written to a specific church with its own situational and historical context. Like the rest of Paul's epistles, Romans must be read with its context in mind. Unfortunately Romans is sometimes read as if it exists in a genre of its own, apart from its context as if it is nothing but a systematic theological essay that emerged from a vacuum.

Like any other epistle, Romans was written for a purpose and to a people in a situation. In particular, the edict of Claudius to expel Jewish people from Rome in A.D. 49 likely had a significant impact on the writing of Romans.

### **The Edict of Claudius**

At its earliest, the Christian church was primarily Jewish. It was, in fact, considered a sect of Judaism and not a distinct religion or belief system. As Jewish followers of Jesus moved away from Jerusalem for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was persecution, they settled in some distinctly non-Jewish regions. Because these migrating communities of Jewish followers of Jesus were the first wave of Christian "missionaries," they were inevitably bringing the message of Jesus to some of these regions for the first time. For the most part local churches had not been established yet and these Jewish followers of Jesus worshipped in local synagogues and had influence there. One of the cities that Jewish followers of Jesus gathered in was Rome.

Rome was a religiously pluralistic, cosmopolitan city. The practice of offering worship to gods was commonplace, but the idea of worshipping only one God was considered borderline atheism. Given these realities, the integration of Jewish followers of Jesus as well as Gentile

converts into local Roman synagogues was apparently not without its challenges. As Mark Allen Powell describes, “...within twenty years of the crucifixion of Jesus, there appear to have been enough Christians in Rome to create a disturbance worthy of the emperor’s attention...”<sup>1</sup>

The disturbance that Powell refers to is over a man named “Chrestus,” which is likely an alteration of “Christ.” This disturbance was such an inconvenience to the emperor Claudius that he took decisive action. Craig Keener describes it this way;

At some point in the 40’s CE the Jewish community in Rome was apparently divided over questions of the identity of the Messiah, probably Jesus. As a result, the emperor Claudius followed the precedent of the earlier emperor Tiberius and banished the Jews from Rome...Given the context in our sources this may have happened in about the year 49 CE.<sup>2</sup>

The actual edict issued by Claudius is simple, but clear. The Roman historian Suetonius recalls the edict; “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [Christ], he expelled them from Rome.”<sup>3</sup> This expulsion lasted approximately five years and was lifted upon Claudius’ death in 54 CE.

At its founding the church in Rome was primarily Jewish but included a minority of Gentile converts to Christ. The Jewish influence on the Roman church would have been substantial. With the New Testament not written or compiled yet, Gentile converts would be expected to learn the Old Testament as well as be familiar with Jewish practices and even submit

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 274.

<sup>2</sup> Craig Keener, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Suetonius, “The Life of Claudius”  
[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Claudius\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Claudius*.html) 25:4

to a majority Jewish leadership structure. When Jewish people were expelled in 49 CE, all of this would change drastically.

### **The Impact of the Edict**

Acts 18.2 explicitly states that church leaders like Aquila and Priscilla were part of the group that had to leave Rome as a result of the edict. While it may have been beneficial for people like Paul and Apollos, as well as the churches in Corinth and Ephesus, that Aquila and Priscilla were able to minister elsewhere, this would represent a huge loss to the church in Rome. It is likely that there were many Jewish Christian leaders that had to leave the church in Rome. Rapidly, the church in Rome went from a Jewish majority to a Gentile majority with very little Jewish influence. Craig Keener elaborates:

Luke indicates that Priscilla and Aquila, Jews in Rome who were apparently already believers (and possibly church leaders) when Paul met them, had left. It is likely that a substantial number of Jewish Christians, and perhaps all their leaders, left Rome at this point. This means that Gentile Christians had probably constituted the bulk of the Roman church and its leadership for at least five years, and may represent a number of the house churches greeted in Romans 16.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to speculate about what may have happened in the Gentile-majority Roman church during the five years of Claudius' edict. What may be easier to reconstruct is what took place when Jewish people began to return to Rome after Claudius' death in 54 CE. It is likely that the return and re-integration of Jewish followers of Jesus back into the Roman churches and the accompanying challenges is one of the primary issues that precipitated the writing of

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<sup>4</sup> Keener, "Romans," 12

Romans.

In his book; *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans*, James Walters identifies several ways in which the edict of Claudius directly impacted the church in Rome:

- “The edict accelerated the evolution of Christianity’s self-definition as a cult distinct from Judaism.”<sup>5</sup>
- “The ratio of Jewish adherents of the Christian faith to gentiles was affected by the edict.”<sup>6</sup>
- “The ratio of Gentile Christians without Jewish socialization increased.”<sup>7</sup>
- “Expulsion played a decisive role in detaching Roman Christianity from synagogue communities.”<sup>8</sup>
- “[The edict] decisively affected the relationship between the two communities and generated the distinctions that made Nero’s attack on Christians a possibility.”<sup>9</sup>
- “The edict would have caused a considerable shift in the roles of authority in the community.”<sup>10</sup>
- “These circumstances posed a serious threat for the unity of Jew and Gentile in Roman Christianity.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Reconstructing Romans**

Sometimes, in order to place a text in its proper context it is necessary to reverse engineer or reconstruct the context from clues in the text. While this can pose problems, biblical scholars have employed reconstruction to understand unique situational dynamics in other Pauline

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<sup>5</sup> Walters, Walters, James. *Ethnic Issues in Paul's Letter to the Romans: Changing Self-Definitions in Earliest Roman Christianity*. (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1993) 60.

<sup>6</sup> Walters “Ethnic Issues”, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Walters, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Walters, 62.

<sup>9</sup> Walters, 62.

<sup>10</sup>Walters, 64.

<sup>11</sup>Walters, 64.

epistles. For instance, much of what is known as the “Colossian heresy” is reconstructed based on the errors that Paul confronts in the text of Colossians. The *Zondervan NASB Study Bible* says it this way; “Paul never explicitly describes the false teaching he opposes in the Colossian letter. The nature of the heresy must be inferred from statements he made in opposition to the false teachers.”<sup>12</sup> This same type of reconstruction effort may be helpful in understanding Romans. Harry Gamble suggests that; “A study of the edict of Claudius ca. 49 and its consequences is a logical beginning point for reconstructing the situation of Roman Christianity when Paul wrote.”<sup>13</sup>

It is generally agreed upon that Paul wrote Romans very shortly after Jewish people were allowed to return to Rome. Most date the writing of the letter to as soon as one to four years after the return of the Jewish people. Craig Keener suggests; “Paul writes between 55 and 58 CE...hence, one to four years after some of the Jewish believers expelled from Rome have begun to return...”<sup>14</sup>

As was previously stated, the conflicts that may have precipitated the writing of Romans probably did not come to a head until Jewish believers returned to Rome only to find that their local churches no longer resembled the churches that they had left behind. Doug Moo provides a comprehensive summary of the situation at hand;

...the church in Rome was founded by the Jews and was dominated by Jews for the first two decades. But that situation would have suddenly and dramatically changed in A.D. 49. In that year the Roman emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome (see Acts 18.2). A Roman historian tells us he did so because the Jews were fighting over

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<sup>12</sup> Kenneth L. Barker and Donald W. Burdick, eds. *New American Standard Study Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI. Zondervan, 1999), 1738

<sup>13</sup> Gamble, Harry, *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 136

<sup>14</sup> Keener, “Romans,” 15

‘Chrestos’ - almost certainly a corruption of the name *Christos*, ‘Christ.’ At one fell swoop, therefore, all the Jews in the Roman Christian community were forced to leave the city. All that was left were Gentiles, who naturally took over positions of leadership in the community. By the time Paul wrote Romans, probably in A.D. 57, the Roman authorities had tacitly allowed Jews back into the city. But the Jewish Christians returned to a church that, in their absence, has become largely a Gentile institution. The situation was ripe for social tension.<sup>15</sup>

In his commentary on Romans, Moo explains how this situation may have contributed to the writing of Romans; “By the time Paul writes, Jews were allowed back into Rome...But they came back to a church dominated by Gentiles. One can imagine the kind of social tension that such a situation would create. Jews ... now find themselves in a minority. Several key emphases of the letter make good sense against this background...”<sup>16</sup>

It is entirely possible that Romans was written to address the social and ethnic tension that existed in the Roman church. A. Andrew Das suggests;

During the expulsion period, the Romans congregations may have added Gentile converts, meaning that the returning Jewish Christians - formerly a majority in the churches - now find themselves in the minority...Under this scenario, Paul wrote the letter both to Jewish and Gentile Christ-believers to assist them in their relationships with each other and to remind them of their indebtedness to the spiritual heritage of the Jewish people.<sup>17</sup>

Reading Romans with the Edict of Claudius in mind is no different than reading Galatians with the Judaizers in mind or reading Revelation with the Roman Empire in mind.

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<sup>15</sup> Douglas Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 27

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Moo, *NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 18

<sup>17</sup> A. Andrew Das, “Romans, Letter to the,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Kenneth Berding identifies several key passages in Romans where it is likely that Paul is addressing issues that arose as a result of the Edict of Claudius. Berding isolates 15 rhetorical questions posed by Paul that may represent the same questions being considered by the Roman church. These questions include:

- “What advantage has the Jew?” (Rom. 3.1)
- “Are we [Jews] better than they [Gentiles]?” (Rom. 3.9)
- “Is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles as well?” (Rom. 3.29)<sup>18</sup>

In fact, Paul may have spent the entirety of Romans chapters 1-3 establishing some sort of base level equality between Jewish and Gentile Christians who may have been in tension about how the two groups were to relate. Paul uses phrases like; “to all who are beloved in Rome, called as saints” (Rom. 1.7), “there is no partiality with God” (Rom. 2.11), “all have sinned” (Rom. 3.23) and more in order to establish equality.

Romans chapters 4-6 provide a theological explanation for justification by faith, as opposed to ethnicity. Paul reaches back into Jewish history to utilize Abraham as his illustration, but makes the point that circumcision (a valuable concept to the Jews) is not necessary to be in covenant with God. Paul uses a Jewish story in order to advocate for Gentile inclusion.

Chapters 9 and 11 provide powerful word pictures of clay and olive tree, respectively, to illustrate Israel’s role in redemptive history and how Gentile Christians relate to both believing and unbelieving Israel. The olive tree metaphor celebrates the Jewish roots and foundation of the

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<sup>18</sup> Berding, Kenneth, Biola University. “Something About the Book of Romans that will Help You Really ‘Get’ It.” Accessed March 3, 2020  
<https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2012/something-about-the-book-of-romans-that-will-help-you-really-get-it>



church, but also acknowledges that some unbelieving olive branches have been broken off while other wild (Gentile) olive branches have been grafted on.

Chapters 12, 14-15 provide clear and practical directives for how Jewish and Gentile believers should relate to one another. Paul emphasizes practical love from a sincere heart. He illustrates his point by using the “body” as a metaphor for how each part is valuable.

Chapter 13 outlines how they should respond to the governing authorities-the very authorities that caused this conflict and who would later heap persecution on both Jewish and Gentile believers alike.

### **Conclusion**

If Romans is written to a multi-cultural church that is struggling to find its identity and integrate believers from different backgrounds, then it has unique insight for the church today. Its themes of equality, justification by faith and practical love in the midst of social and ethnic tension provide examples to churches that are wrestling with these issues.

Just as a church that struggles with legalism might benefit from a study of Galatians, or a church that is rife with moral failing might benefit from a study of 1st Corinthians, a church that seeks peace among diverse followers of Jesus would benefit from a study of Romans.

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