

WHEN IN ROMANS

An Invitation to Linger
with the Gospel according to Paul

Beverly Roberts Gaventa



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For Matthew, Sarah, and Charlie

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SERIES PREFACE

Long before it became popular to speak about a “generous orthodoxy,” John Wesley attempted to carry out his ministry and engage in theological conversations with what he called a “catholic spirit.” Although he tried to remain “united by the tenderest and closest ties to one particular congregation”¹ (i.e., Anglicanism) all his life, he also made it clear that he was committed to the orthodox Christianity of the ancient creeds, and his library included books from a variety of theological traditions within the church catholic. We at Nazarene Theological Seminary (NTS) remain committed to the theological tradition associated with Wesley but, like Wesley himself, are very conscious of the generous gifts we have received from a variety of theological traditions. One specific place this happens in the ongoing life of our community is in the public lectures funded by the generosity of various donors. It is from those lectures that the contributions to this series arise.

1. John Wesley, *Sermon 39, “Catholic Spirit,”* §III.4, in *Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 2:79–95. We know, however, that his public ties with Anglicanism were at some points in his life anything but tender and close.

The books in this series are expanded forms of public lectures presented at NTS as installments in two ongoing, endowed lectureships: the Earle Lectures on Biblical Literature and the Grider-Winget Lectures in Theology. The Earle Lecture series is named in honor of the first professor of New Testament at NTS, Ralph Earle. Initiated in 1949 with W. F. Albright for the purpose of “stimulating further research in biblical literature,” this series has brought outstanding biblical scholars to NTS, including F. F. Bruce, I. Howard Marshall, Walter Brueggemann, Richard Hays, Terence Fretheim, and Joel Green. The Grider-Winget Lecture series is named in honor of J. Kenneth Grider, longtime professor of theology at NTS, and in memory of Dr. Wilfred L. Winget, a student of Dr. Grider and the son of Mabel Fransen Winget, who founded the series. The lectureship was initiated in 1991 with Thomas Langford for the purpose of “bringing outstanding guest theologians to NTS.” Presenters for this lectureship have included Theodore Runyon, Donald Bloesch, Jürgen Moltmann, Robert Jenson, and Amy Plantinga Pauw.

The title of this monograph series indicates how we understand its character and purpose. First, even though the lectureships are geared toward biblical literature *and* systematic theology, we believe that the language of “theological explorations” is as appropriate to an engagement with Scripture as it is to an engagement with contemporary systematic theology. Though it is legitimate to approach at least some biblical texts with nontheological questions, we do not believe that doing so is to approach them *as Scripture*. Old and New Testament texts are not inert containers from which to draw theological insights; they are already witnesses to a serious theological engagement with particular historical, social, and political situations. Hence, biblical texts should be approached *on their own terms* through asking theological questions. Our intent, then,

is that this series will be characterized by theological explorations from the fields of biblical studies and systematic theology.

Second, the word “explorations” is appropriate since we ask the lecturers to explore the cutting edge of their current interests and thinking. With the obvious time limitations of three public lectures, even their expanded versions will generally result not in long, detailed monographs but rather in shorter, suggestive treatments of a given topic—that is, explorations.

Finally, with the language of “the church catholic,” we intend to convey our hope that these volumes should be *pro ecclesia* in the broadest sense—given by lecturers representing a variety of theological traditions for the benefit of the whole church of Jesus Christ. We at NTS have been generously gifted by those who fund these two lectureships. Our hope and prayer is that this series will become a generous gift to the church catholic, one means of equipping the people of God for participation in the *missio Dei*.

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PREFACE

This book on Romans is intended for people who would not normally read a book about Romans. Already there are books—many books—for people who do read books about Romans. Stacks of them arrive on a regular basis. Keeping up with them is nearly impossible, even for the most diligent specialist. As the books pile up, the conversation grows increasingly precise, technical, and challenging for the nonspecialist. And that’s a problem, because Romans is too important to be turned over to a handful of specialists, however learned and insightful they may be.

What I have tried to offer in this book is an invitation to Romans, focusing on aspects of the letter that I find crucial, both for the first century and for our own. In the introduction I take up a few general questions about the composition of the letter, but the book is not a survey of the letter. It is also not a commentary on the whole of the letter, although I am preparing one of those as well. I have tried to keep the text itself free of the jargon and the clutter of detailed argument that causes readers to slip away for their siestas. The notes should be helpful

for those who want to read further on a particular point, but most readers can simply pass over them. The list of suggested readings at the end also provides an entry point for further study.

In the introduction I observe that no one writes alone. Certainly I have not written this book alone. It began with an invitation from Dean Roger Hahn to deliver the Earle Lectures on Biblical Literature at Nazarene Theological Seminary in the fall of 2013. I am grateful to my host and colleague Andy Johnson for the good conversations around those lectures as well as the hospitality extended to me on that occasion. And I appreciate the relationship between the Earle Lectures and Baker Academic, which prompted me to expand and revise those lectures into this book.

I also presented earlier versions of chapters 1–3 as the Currie Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in February 2015. I am grateful to President Theodore Wardlaw for that invitation, as well as for his friendship of many years. The week itself was a delightful combination of worship, lectures, conversation, and fellowship.

Former students at Princeton Theological Seminary, where I taught courses on Romans regularly for nearly two decades, may recognize anecdotes and analogies to which they were subjected in various pedagogical experiments. With their nods, amens, groans, and even occasional yawns, they helped me sort words that hit their communicative targets from words that needed to be targeted elsewhere. I am happy to acknowledge their assistance.

Friends in ministry Patrick James Willson and Leslie Murphy King read portions of the manuscript and made numerous suggestions for improvement, and I am grateful for their care and encouragement.

Rendering earlier oral presentations into written form became much easier with the help of my graduate assistants at

Baylor University. Scott Ryan and Natalie Webb provided important research assistance at an early stage in the work. Natalie also read the manuscript during the copyediting stage, saving me some embarrassment and making numerous suggestions throughout. Justin King was invaluable in the final stages of manuscript preparation. In addition to tracking down bibliographical information, Justin read the entire manuscript, corrected numerous errors, and became an important conversation partner about Romans in general and this book in particular. I am also pleased to acknowledge the support of the Baylor University Department of Religion, especially our chair, William H. Bellinger Jr.

As much as I might wish otherwise, these fine people are not responsible for the missteps, the infelicities, and the errors that remain in what follows.

This book is dedicated to three people who give me boundless joy: my son, Matthew Gaventa; my daughter-in-law, Sarah Kinney Gaventa; and their son, Charlie. Matthew and Sarah both proclaim the gospel regularly in word and deed, and I hope something here will be useful for them and their congregations. Charlie does not yet read books about the Bible, at least not books without pictures, but I hope he will one day enjoy reading the Bible itself. For now, I am happy to report that this book, although it has no dinosaurs, does have one discussion about trains and the people who ride them.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this book plays on the old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do.” That familiar adage suggests that we should behave as the locals do so as not to stand out, not to give offense. Although it sounds like contemporary folk wisdom, it did not arrive in the baggage of twentieth-century relativism. It goes at least as far back as a letter written by Augustine of Hippo around 390. Augustine in turn was citing advice he had received from Ambrose of Milan:

When I go to Rome, I fast on Saturday, but here [in Milan] I do not. Do you also follow the custom of whatever church you attend, if you do not want to give or receive scandal.¹

I have transferred the saying, if somewhat artificially, from a place to a text, a very important and familiar text, Paul’s Letter to the Romans. And I use the saying by way of introducing the question: What happens to readers, hearers, teachers, and

1. St. Augustine, “Letter 54: Augustine gives greeting in the Lord to his most beloved son, Januarius (c. 400),” in *Letters*, vol. 1, trans. Sister W. Parsons, Fathers of the Church (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1951), 253–54.

preachers of the church in the early part of the twenty-first century, when we are “in Romans”?²

My own impression, an impression shaped by decades of teaching in Protestant seminaries and in continuing-education forums of several sorts, is that we are seldom *in* Romans for very long. At most, we make weekend visits. We know the purple passages:

I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation . . . (1:16)

All things work together for good . . . (8:28)

Faith comes from what is heard . . . (10:17)³

A few more sentences might be added to the list, depending on our particular experiences in Christian communities or our educational backgrounds.

We have probably spent time with the second half of Romans 1 as we discern what Scripture has to say about same-sex relations. We know the closing lines of Romans 8 quite well, because we read them at funerals with hearts overflowing and sometimes even with our fists clenched so that the nails bite into our palms and keep us from losing control. The lectionary may have led us to further study, although I know more than one very fine preacher who regularly opts for the Gospel lesson rather than struggling with Paul’s abstractions, with the tortured logic, and with the seeming contradictions in his argument.

2. I use the first-person plural here, as I will elsewhere in this book, not with the notion of coercing readers into agreement but simply in the hope of inviting readers to spend some time in Romans with me. Since readers will bring their own diverse experiences both to reading Romans and to reading my comments about Romans, “we” may find ourselves in disagreement along the way.

3. NRSV. Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

We have read the letter, of course. We have read it multiple times. But that act in itself does not necessarily help, for we read with our predispositions in place. It is as if we ride through Romans on one of those hop-on, hop-off tourist buses, seeing the same highlights every time we travel around the circuit. We never notice that we are in a vast metropolitan area. And that metropolitan area is larger, more astonishing, and more disturbing than we imagine.

In my judgment, that metropolis—large and wild and unsettling—is vital for the life of the church. That is not to say that Romans can be applied narrowly to every issue before us in the church’s life. This is not a one-size-fits-all bandage. Romans will not settle the dispute over the color of the carpet or close the gap in the budget. It will not even dictate our music selections. What Romans does, however, is confront us with the universal, cosmic horizon of the good news.

Being “in Romans” for an extended period of time, in the presence of the vastness of the gospel as Paul interprets it, will upset some of our assumptions. As we will see in chapter 1 below, salvation in Romans turns out to involve not just individuals or even groups of people (whether the church or ethnic or other groups) but the liberation of the whole of the created world from the grasp of powers that Paul calls Sin and Death. Chapter 2 takes us into the difficult question of Paul’s comments about Israel. There we will find that, especially in Romans 9–11, Paul is less concerned with whether Israel believes in Jesus as its Messiah than with God’s unilateral act of creating, redeeming, and sustaining Israel (along with the gentiles). In chapter 3 we take up the question of Christian behavior (“ethics” or “morals”), only to find that in Romans ethics is deeply connected with the worship that all creation owes to its creator, just as worship expresses itself (or fails to do so) with every action of the human being. Chapter 4 concerns the

community of believers, which we call the church. There we will see that Paul's comments in Romans elevate believers to the high status of sons and daughters of God, while simultaneously recognizing that the community is capable of severely destructive behavior. At every one of these turns, then, being "in Romans" means seeing ourselves and the world as a whole with disturbing—even brutal—honesty, while also seeing God's action in Jesus Christ to redeem all creation. The universal horizon of the letter does not exist in some strange Platonic realm remote from human struggle; rather, God's universal horizon grasps humanity, re-creating and empowering humanity both for the present and for the future.

Romans as a Letter

When we are "in Romans," we are, first of all, in a letter written two millennia ago by the apostle Paul, about whom we know rather little, to groups of Christians in Rome, about whom we know even less.⁴ One of the challenges for many readers of Romans is that it does not much resemble the letters we know.⁵ For that reason, it is tempting to read Romans (or other New Testament letters) as if it were a theoretical essay or a treatise rather than a specific word addressed to specific people in particular situations.⁶ Especially because it is a letter, however, we need to know something of its circumstances.

4. Paul never uses the term "Christian," and its use is somewhat misleading, especially if it is understood as suggesting that he and other Jewish believers had ceased to be Jews. Yet I find the customary alternatives (e.g., "Christ-followers" or "Jesus-followers") awkward, so I persist in the traditional label, with caution.

5. It might be preferable to say letters as we remember or imagine them, so removed are actual letters from our common experience. For an introduction to letter writing in Paul's world, see H. J. Klauck, *Ancient Letters and the New Testament* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006).

6. Even that distinction is misleading, however, since essays and treatises also reflect the circumstances of the writer and her desired audience.

What we know of the apostle Paul comes largely from his letters.⁷ Because he is not given to the sort of personal disclosure we have come to take for granted, tracking down information about his life is difficult, and reconstructing Paul's biography is not the task of this book.⁸ We do know that Paul has not yet been to Rome, as he indicates in 1:8–15 and again in 15:22–24. That fact seems to influence the letter in several ways. For one thing, Paul cannot appeal to his relationship with these Roman Christians or to their shared experience of the gospel, as he does effusively with the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians. He also cannot appeal to any authority he has as the one who first preached the gospel to them, as he does in Galatians and the Corinthian correspondence. He must tread very carefully.

And what can we learn about the audience, apart from the fact that these people also are “called to be saints,” as Paul terms them in 1:7, and that they live in Rome? The body of the letter yields very few clues about the audience, and even some of the clues we do find are ambiguous. In 1:5–6, for example, it is unclear whether Paul means that the audience itself is made up of gentiles or that its members live among the gentiles. When Paul writes in 2:17, “If you call yourself a Jew . . . ,” does that mean he is in fact speaking directly to Jewish Christians? Or could he be speaking instead to gentiles who have strongly identified with the synagogue? The same ambiguity plagues 7:1,

7. The Acts of the Apostles also contains considerable information about Paul's life and circumstances, but it was written decades after Paul's death, and assessing the historical accuracy of Luke's account is tricky. I advocate employing Acts in a secondary way, as it corroborates Paul's letters, rather than taking Acts as a biographical framework into which to insert bits and pieces drawn from Paul's letters. A classic statement of this problem is that of John Knox in *Chapters in a Life of Paul* (New York: Abingdon, 1950), 13–43.

8. For a brief introduction to questions of Paul's biography, see David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul*, Approaches to Biblical Studies (London: T&T Clark, 2000); for further discussion, see Calvin J. Roetzel, *Paul: The Man and the Myth* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

where Paul writes that he is speaking with those who “know the law.” Are these Jews, or are they gentiles who have knowledge of the Mosaic law (as in Acts 15:21) or even Roman law? In Romans 11:13 Paul does speak directly to gentiles, but that statement does little to help us determine what proportion of Roman believers were gentiles and what proportion were Jews. The one place where we find specific names is in the long set of greetings at the close of the letter (16:3–16), but this passage also raises many questions about Paul’s audience.⁹

The Greetings of Romans 16

Romans 16 does provide us with valuable information about Paul’s audience. Yet I suspect many people who read Paul’s Letter to the Romans simply skip this last chapter altogether. Apart from the concluding benediction in verses 25–27, the Revised Common Lectionary overlooks this passage, and we can scarcely blame the editors for that decision. When we hit this list of names, we may joke a bit about their strangeness;

9. Although other letters do have closing greetings (as in 1 Cor. 16:19–20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Phil. 4:21–22; 1 Thess. 5:26; Philem. 23–24), this is by far the longest list of greetings in any of Paul’s letters. Because Paul has not yet been to Rome, it is hard to understand how he is able to greet so many individuals by name. It may be that he greets everyone he knows—even indirectly—in order to consolidate these relationships (so Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser, ed. Marshall D. Johnson [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003], 157). We would probably call it networking. But because he has not been to Rome, and also because there are some important differences among the earliest handwritten copies (manuscripts) of this letter, and even one manuscript that omits the greetings, T. W. Manson argued that the greetings were not part of the original letter. Manson theorized that the original letter to Roman Christians did not have this list of greetings but that later Paul sent the same letter to the Ephesians, greetings included (“St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans—and Others,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 3–15). Most scholars have rejected that theory, because the evidence for it is quite minimal. It seems far more likely that a later editor or scribe deleted the greetings so that the letter would be more suitable for a larger audience.

Tryphaena and Tryphosa are unlikely candidates for popular baby names in twenty-first-century America, although I hope for a surge of young women named Junia. Yet for the most part we breathe a deep sigh of relief that we have—finally—reached the letter’s end. This is a bit like coming upon a genealogy in the Old Testament, where we skip over the “begats” and take up the next section.

It may seem surprising to learn that scholars have devoted a great deal of attention in the last several decades to the greetings in Romans 16. Precisely because the body of the letter tells us rather little about the audience, scholars have focused on the greetings in an effort to see what information we might glean from the names themselves. And we know names can reveal a great deal. When I visit the little country cemetery where several members of my extended family are buried, I am sharply reminded that the Scots and the Irish were prominent among the residents of that region for generations. I am not sure there is an Olson or a González buried there, to say nothing of a Cho or a Gertmenian.

This set of greetings reveals several important things about the audience of Paul’s letter. First, we should think of it not as a single group, “the Roman church,” but as several small groups of believers. Verse 5 refers to the gathering (*ekklēsia*, which we translate “congregation” or even “church”) in the house of Prisca and Aquila.¹⁰ Later, Paul greets some individuals by name and then adds “and the brothers and sisters who are with them” or “all the saints who are with them,” which could also mean the believers who meet with them.

10. For discussion of Christian meeting places, see Edward Adams, *The Earliest Christian Meeting Places: Almost Exclusively Houses?* (London: T&T Clark/Bloomsbury, 2013); David Balch and Annette Weissenrieder, eds., *Contested Spaces: Houses and Temples in Roman Antiquity and the New Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012).

Second, several of the people Paul greets bear names that were regularly used for slaves, such as Hermes, Nereus, and Persis. Perhaps surprisingly, relatively few of the names suggest Jewish descent. And many of the names are those of immigrants from the Roman East.¹¹

Third, a high proportion of women's names appear on the list, and what Paul has to say about them comes as a surprise to readers who have been taught that Paul advocates the submission of women and the suppression of their voices. He comments that Prisca, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis "worked" with him (Prisca, v. 3; Mary, v. 6; Tryphaena, Tryphosa, and Persis, v. 12). That bland verb does not convey a great deal in English, but this is the language he uses elsewhere when he is speaking about apostolic labor (as in 1 Cor. 3:9; 4:12; 15:10; Gal. 4:11; 1 Thess. 5:12). In addition, when he refers to the couple Prisca and Aquila, her name comes first, as it does in Acts 18:18, 26 and 2 Timothy 4:19.¹² That is not a gesture to chivalry, since in the ancient world the husband's name usually went first (as in Rom. 16:7; Acts 5:1). The fact that Paul switches the order could suggest that Prisca is the more prominent figure in the Christian community.

Another couple appears in Romans 16:7, Andronicus and Junia. Paul identifies them as "kinfolk," suggesting they are Jews, but he also says that they are "fellow prisoners" and that they are "honored among the apostles." This identification of a woman as an "apostle" was obscured by much of twentieth-century exegesis and translation, which referred to a male "Junias" instead of a female "Junia."¹³ Yet interpreters across

11. See the meticulous work of Peter Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus*, esp. 74–76, 164–83.

12. Aquila appears first in Acts 18:2 and 1 Cor. 16:19.

13. The two Greek names are distinguishable in the accusative case, as in Rom. 16:7, only by a single accent mark, and accents rarely appeared in ancient texts.

the first millennium of the church's life consistently identify Junia as an apostle. Equally important, there is no evidence in antiquity for the use of the male name Junias, making it quite likely that Paul indeed includes a woman among the apostles.¹⁴

Between Paul and Rome: Phoebe

In addition to Paul, the letter writer, and the Romans, the recipients of the letter, there is Phoebe, whose role in the letter's reception at Rome is probably far larger than most readers have imagined. Before Paul greets those who are actually in Rome, he writes a brief introduction for her:

I present to you Phoebe, our sister, who is also deacon of the congregation at Cenchreae, so that you may welcome her in the Lord as is appropriate for the saints, and assist her in whatever she may need from you. She has been a benefactor of many people and of myself as well. (16:1–2)

These few lines will not seem like much; they may reek of polite church chatter. Yet Paul reveals here quite a lot about Phoebe. She is “our sister”—that is, she is a follower of Jesus Christ. She is from the congregation at Cenchreae, the port city of Corinth, which presumably places both her and Paul in the vicinity of Corinth for the writing of this letter.¹⁵

14. Although the Acts of the Apostles assumes that there can be only twelve apostles (which excludes Paul himself), Paul does not seem to think of the number as fixed (although see 1 Cor. 15:5). For a thorough discussion of the evidence about Junia, see Eldon Epp, *Junia: The First Woman Apostle* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

15. The fact that Phoebe is from Cenchreae may suggest that she is a gentile, since the Corinthian congregation seems to consist largely if not entirely of gentile believers. No evidence has been found in Cenchreae for Jewish settlement in this period (i.e., no synagogue remains, no identifiably Jewish artifacts); see Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 945.

Paul uses two important terms for Phoebe, *diakonos* (deacon) and *prostatis* (benefactor). When I pick up a new translation of the Bible or a new commentary on Romans, this is one of the passages I check first, because that Greek word *diakonos* has been rendered with a range of English nouns—from “deacon” to “minister” to “servant” to “deaconess.” To be sure, in the various small and emerging congregations of the first century, a *diakonos* is not someone who enters into a period of training and after that carries out specific roles in the life of the church. Yet it seems clear that, for Paul, the term must connote something of significance, since he applies it both to Jesus Christ (Rom. 15:8) and to himself (1 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 3:6). When Paul says that Phoebe is a *deacon*, then, he probably does not mean just that she helps out in the kitchen (or that she is a “dear Christian woman,” as in the Living Bible). Some quality of leadership is connoted by the term.

That hunch is reinforced by the second word, *prostatis*, which again has been translated in a variety of ways (assistant, helper, servant), the most appropriate of which is “patron,” or better, “benefactor.” There is considerable evidence for the importance of the patronage system in the Roman world, in which individuals who were further up the food chain made gifts to those further down, in exchange for honor and loyalty. And women were among the patrons, whether to individuals (gifts or loans or favors from one woman to another) or to groups or even cities (meals distributed to children throughout a city).¹⁶ Although we assume that women in the Roman world were excluded from public life, law and practice did not always coincide. The satirist Juvenal (the first century’s Stephen Colbert, but with more acid and less charm) opines that the best path

16. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman’s Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 194–219.

to social advancement is through the favors of a wealthy, old woman (*Sat.* 1.39). Juvenal also complains that women not only host dinner parties but even have the audacity to talk about literature, philosophy, and politics. Presumably Juvenal would not have been at all amused by Phoebe. As a *prostatas*, a patron, she would have advanced Christian mission in some concrete ways. In short, if first-century churches had buildings and the buildings had wall plaques, Phoebe's name might well appear at the top of the list. (This means that paraphrasing "benefactor" with "she has been helpful," as the New Living Translation does, considerably understates Paul's identification of her and her importance.)

Paul goes on to say that Phoebe "has been a benefactor of many people and of myself as well." Paul's work with his own hands was not enough to supply the needs of his mission, as we see here and elsewhere. Phoebe's support may include hosting Christian gatherings in her home, but that is not to identify her as an early Christian Martha Stewart, the sleek hostess offering her designer kitchen for the weekly potluck supper. The home was itself a much more public place than is typically the case in the contemporary West, and householders received business associates or clients in their homes, not in spaces dedicated as offices. To say that women taught at home or convened groups at home is not to segregate, as this is where the action was. Where else would they be?

It is likely, then, that Phoebe is a person of some means. I deduce that point not simply from the identification of her as a "deacon" and a "benefactor" but also from the fact that she has the ability to travel to Rome. Apparently she has her own funds, since if she were married and making use of her husband's money, Paul would probably have referred to her husband. (That would have been the custom.) At least *some* of the earliest Christians were people of standing and means

who put their resources and prestige at the disposal of the mission.

This is a considerable introduction, but why does it appear? Probably it appears because Phoebe is the bearer of the letter, as most interpreters agree. The only reliable mail service that existed was used entirely for the official business of government. Private letter writers who were wealthy used slaves; others did the best they could, generally seeking a friend or acquaintance traveling to the destination of the letter.¹⁷ It seems clear that Paul commends Phoebe because she carries the letter.

That point is worth enjoying for a moment. Paul writes these lines by way of introducing her to the gathered faithful in Rome. She has come to Rome and has brought the letter with her. This letter—the one that stands first in the Pauline canon, the one over which an ocean of ink has been spilled, over which countless theological battles have been waged (and are still being waged), on the perilous rocks of which exegetical careers have been made and lost—this letter was delivered by a woman. There is an irony in that detail that is perhaps best appreciated when you consider that the history of Pauline interpretation (to our knowledge) has been an overwhelmingly male endeavor.

Let's tease out this point a bit further. If Phoebe is the carrier of the letter, and most scholars agree on that point, then she was almost certainly engaged in discussing its content in advance. Paul did not simply identify someone he happened to know in Cenchreae, or someone who was already headed to Rome on a quick business trip, and then ask her to take along the letter. That much is clear from what he says about Phoebe. Given the importance Paul attaches to this letter, how likely is it that he would entrust it to someone who does not know rather

17. Klauck, *Ancient Letters*, 60–66.

specifically what he wants the letter to achieve? He would not have entrusted the letter to Phoebe without making sure that she understood its content and could represent it.

Phoebe may even have had a hand in shaping the content of the letter. That may seem an outlandish suggestion. The problem is that we tend to think of Paul's authorship of letters as a solitary act. We talk as if Paul sat at his desk the way I sit at mine and wrote as an isolated individual who had a particular set of ideas he wanted to express. Already the analogy suggests problems with this "Lone Ranger" notion. None of us writes alone. Even when we are frantically writing at 3:00 a.m., and ours is the only window on the street where the light still shines, we are writing with others. The others may be the colleagues who will read through the report, or the professor whose goodwill we hope to earn (to say nothing of a good grade), or the parishioners who chat over coffee. No one writes alone.

In Paul's world especially, writing was not done alone. Writers did not stake out a carrel in the library or even a corner table at Starbucks. While he was in Corinth, Paul was a guest in the home of Gaius (Rom. 16:23), and he very likely dictated his letter to Tertius (see 16:22) in the midst of the busy comings and goings that made the "private" realm far more public than most contemporary Westerners can imagine.

Even if Paul somehow "composed" or dictated in private, it is quite likely that some or all of this letter was read aloud to Gaius's household and guests, whose responses shaped the letter in the form in which it arrived in Rome. This much we can be fairly sure about, given what we know about the way both teaching and writing were done in the ancient world. Phoebe in particular, as the carrier of the letter, may have been involved in responding to early drafts and shaping the direction of the final letter. This suggestion takes us rather deeply into the land

of speculation, but at the very least, Paul would have discussed the letter with her prior to her departure for Rome.

There is yet another point to make, which is that Phoebe is also the one who reads the letter at Rome. After all, she is the one Paul commends. Perhaps others travel with her, but it is Phoebe whom Paul commends to the faithful, so surely it is Phoebe who best represents his argument.¹⁸

Further, if Phoebe does read the letter, then she is the first interpreter of the letter. That may seem a stretch, but it is actually pretty obvious. To read is to interpret. We experience that with the daily news—the headlines of the day sound one way on MSNBC, another on PBS, and yet another on Fox News. We all experience the power of readings in every service of public worship. Whether the Scripture lessons accuse us, comfort us, or simply bounce off unattended has a great deal to do with how they are read.

Almost inevitably, Phoebe shaped the hearing of the letter by the way she read it, whether she rushed through some passages, lingered over others, paused to allow the words to sink in, or stopped to add an explanatory note at various points. Phoebe had a role in interpreting the letter. She and Paul may even have talked about what sort of delivery he wanted, but when the time came and especially as questions arose, she was on her own.

Even if she did not read the letter herself, she would have been responsible for seeing that it circulated among the congregations at Rome, where her comments about it and her conversation with others after their hearing of the letter would have played a role in its reception.

18. This is a disputed point, as some assume Phoebe would not have been capable of reading the letter. To be sure, literacy rates were low, and the literacy rate of women was even lower than that of men. Nevertheless, some women did read, and those who did were located precisely among the women of resources such as Phoebe. See William Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), especially 48, 67, 96, 103, 108, 140, 173, 252–63, 271, 328.

Paul and His Purposes in Romans

This exploration of the persons involved in composing, delivering, and hearing Paul's Letter to the Romans may help to render it less abstract and remote, but we have not yet touched on the question of why Romans looks the way it does. Why did Paul write this particular letter?

Answering that question for Paul's other letters is a bit easier. Beneath the effusive thanksgivings of 1 Thessalonians 1 and 2, it is not difficult to see Paul's concern for the community's persistence in the gospel (see 1 Thess. 3:1–10) and especially for the community's behavior (see 1 Thess. 4:1–12). Galatians makes it obvious early on that Paul regards the activity of some other Jewish Christian missionaries to be so wrongheaded that he calls it "another gospel," which does not even exist (1:6–9). Scholars disagree about the specifics of these situations, but the clues they work with lie ready to hand.

Romans offers few such clues about the hopes and concerns that prompt the letter and shape its content. In the opening lines of Romans 1 and in the closing discussion in Romans 15, Paul comments in general terms about his work and his planned trip to Rome (as well as to Jerusalem and Spain), but the body of the letter frustrates our detective work with its silence. Why does he write at such length about human sin, for example, when his other letters have far less to say on that topic? And what prompts the need to discuss God's relationship with Israel at such length and in such a meandering fashion (chaps. 9–11)?

One possibility is that, although the other letters address specific problems or concerns, Romans is more of an essay, perhaps even Paul's theological magnum opus. Earlier generations thought of Romans as just such an essay, and this seems a reasonable suggestion until we consider the context in which Paul worked. He was not an intellectual with leisure time for

reflection and writing on the state of the world. Given what we learn of him from his other letters, supplemented by the Acts of the Apostles, Paul was intensely and constantly engaged in introducing the gospel in cities across the Mediterranean world. He worked to support himself, which gave him opportunities for talking with people about the gospel while avoiding the charge of hucksterism. That makes it a bit difficult to imagine his having the leisure for contemplating his “big” reflective essay. Scholars largely agree that this letter, like Paul’s other letters, addresses some particular concern.

Having that agreement does not yield agreement about the situation itself. In fact, the problem is so widely discussed by scholars that it carries its own title: “the Romans debate.”¹⁹ The proposals are many and varied, and here I will provide only a few possibilities to give the flavor of the discussion.²⁰ One helpful way to think of the debate is by way of Romans 15:22–29, where Paul announces, “I am going to Jerusalem,” after which he plans to travel to Rome and then to Spain. Each of these locations serves as the focal point for suggestions about the letter’s purpose.

First, Jerusalem. Paul is about to leave for Jerusalem, delivering to Christians there the funds collected from his gentile churches in Macedonia and Achaia.²¹ His anxious plea for prayers on behalf of this mission (15:30–32) reveals his worry that the fund might be refused, presumably because accepting

19. Karl P. Donfried edited a collection of essays on the problem in 1977 with the title *The Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg). The book was revised and expanded in 1991 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson) and was reissued in 2011 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic). It still provides a helpful sampling of major views.

20. In addition to and updating Donfried’s collection, see the survey in A. Andrew Das, *Solving the Romans Debate* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 9–52.

21. Paul writes about the collection(s) in Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; and especially 2 Cor. 8–9. For an extensive study, see David J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles: Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem in Its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

the money means acknowledging Paul's understanding of the gospel, which includes his notion that Christ is for all people, gentiles included. And that inclusion does not require gentiles to be circumcised or follow Torah. For those who emphasize Jerusalem, Romans is something like Paul's rehearsal of what he will say in Jerusalem, by way of urging Roman Christians to pray for him.

Second, Spain. As Paul also indicates, he intends to go from Rome to Spain. For that he needs support, and some think Paul writes Romans in order to lay the groundwork for seeking support—material and otherwise—for that new venture. He does seem to hint at this in 15:24, when he comments that he hopes to be “sent on” to Spain by the Romans. In addition, his request that the Romans provide Phoebe with whatever she might need (16:2) could be connected with his plans for the Spanish mission.

Third, Rome. Most proposals focus the reasons for Paul's letter on Rome itself. One popular argument is that Paul is aware of conflict at Rome between Jewish and gentile believers (drawing especially on Rom. 14). Another is that Paul is aware that the Jewish Christian missionaries who proved so problematic to him in the Galatian congregations are making their way to Rome, where they will again insist (or have already insisted?) that gentiles abide by Jewish law. Yet another suggestion is that Paul fears that word of the conflict in the Galatian churches has preceded him to Rome, where he is understood to be an antinomian who has abandoned Jewish tradition.

These are not all mutually exclusive options. Paul certainly hopes for support for the Spanish mission (although it is not at all clear that this desire proves a major factor in the content of the letter). His anxiety about Jerusalem and the reception of his understanding of the gospel there also seems clear, given his repeated emphasis on God's welcome of both Jew and gentile.

Yet more may be involved here than an affirmation of God's persistent faithfulness to Israel and radical welcome of gentiles. While not in any way undermining that faithfulness, Paul locates God's faithfulness and God's radical welcome *within* a larger context, which involves the whole of the created order. The letter demonstrates this vastness, which means that, in a sense, Romans is a proclamation of the gospel, just as Paul himself says in 1:15.²² He fears that the Romans have not heard the gospel in its fullness.

Most readers of Romans have no need to declare their allegiance for one or another of the proposals from among this dizzying array. Indeed, it may be a mistake to tie our readings too tightly to any particular view, as there may well be more than one angle in play. The benefit of keeping these various possibilities in mind is that they may help us to think of this as a real letter, rather than (again) treating it as a reflective essay on abstract issues that have little traction in real life.

A Few Words about Being “in” Romans

Before we turn to the letter itself, a few words about reading Romans may be helpful. Anyone who picks up this book already knows the dangers of proof-texting. We experience the problem routinely when the single comment of any individual metastasizes into a public nightmare via Twitter or Facebook. Wrenching comments out of context has become a way of life in our public discourse, to the detriment of the common good. Well before the rise of the Twitterverse, however, the

22. This also accounts for Paul's statement in 15:20 that he does not preach “where Christ is already named.” It may be that he thinks Christ is not in fact fully “named” in Rome. See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “‘To Preach the Gospel’: Romans 1,15 and the Purposes of Romans,” in *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Udo Schnelle, BETL 226 (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 179–95.

difficulties involved in proof-texting from the Bible were already painfully obvious, as when Jesus’s statement that “you always have the poor with you” (Mark 14:7; Matt. 26:11; John 12:8 NRSV) provided an excuse for neglecting the needs of others, to say nothing of actually supporting corrupt social systems.

Strangely enough, despite the fact that we know these dangers elsewhere, we often still read Romans as if it were a collection of isolated statements that can be plucked from context and spun out into independent sermonettes. Perhaps the most obvious example is that of Romans 8:28: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God” (NRSV).²³ Beginning with this verse, greeting cards, tea towels, and devotional literature promote the notion that those who love God sufficiently can find good in anything, no matter how abysmal the circumstance. The moral offered, implicitly or explicitly, is that we need to be sure we love God “enough” to be able to discern the hidden nugget of goodness in whatever life puts on the table. Yet this statement sits squarely between comments about the work of the Spirit as intercessor and that of God, who calls and sets “us” apart as brothers and sisters of the firstborn, far removed from moralism.

Even those who recognize such egregious examples can still find themselves treating this letter as if it were a collection of steps on an escalator, each of which has exactly the same importance as every other step. But Romans is not a collection of individual propositions or maxims, each of which bears the same weight as every other. It is far more intricate and requires us to read carefully for context, for transitions, even for twists and turns that displace or reinterpret previous statements.

23. As the notes in the NRSV indicate, there are some differences among ancient manuscripts at this point, and there are translation questions, but these have no bearing on my point at present.

For example, in the second half of Romans 2, Paul addresses those who call themselves Jews.²⁴ First he asks whether those same people who identify themselves as Jews break the law, and then he undermines the categories of Jew and gentile by arguing that uncircumcised people who keep the law have priority over Jews who do not. By the time the chapter ends, it seems obvious that being a Jew has no real benefit attached to it, which is exactly the conclusion dangled at the beginning of chapter 3. Yet, having introduced that possibility, Paul immediately insists that the benefit of being a Jew is “much in every way.”²⁵ Part of the challenge of reading Romans is to be alert for such twists and turns, rather than isolating individual statements.

Even in the case of what are obviously important moments in the letter, we need to read both forward and backward. Most interpreters of Paul agree that in 1:16–17 we have an important declaration, something like a “thesis” for the whole letter:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is God’s own power bringing about salvation for everyone who believes, the Jew first and also the Greek. For in the gospel God’s rectification is being apocalyptically revealed from faith for faith, just as it is written, “The righteous one will live from faith.”

As readers, we could spend a very long time unpacking the implications of these verses. What does Paul mean by salvation? by rectification (righteousness)?²⁶ by faith? We only have a clue

24. Whether they actually are Jews or gentiles who affiliate with Jews is a disputed matter we can set aside for now.

25. The questions of 3:1 may well reflect Paul’s use of a rhetorical device, with which he introduces views opposed to his own in order to correct them. Yet that device does not undermine my point, since whoever voices Jewish advantage in 3:2, that assertion would still come as a surprise to an audience that had just heard Rom. 2.

26. Translating *dikaiosynē* and words related to it is extremely difficult, and not only because it is always challenging to take terms across language borders. Different translations reflect both long-standing debates about Pauline theology and contemporary disputes about the contexts of his letters. When I identify “righteousness” as

about what Paul is getting at when we have read the remainder of the letter. We cannot interpret this thesis statement at the outset or apart from the whole of the letter.

In the chapters that follow, we will see more of the intricacy that is Romans. For now what matters is understanding that Romans has surprises for its careful readers. And some of those surprises may even be offensive. Despite the innocuous way in which Paul's letters are often read and interpreted, they are far from innocuous. They usher us into a gospel far more vast than we usually imagine, and that gospel may well take us places we would prefer not to go.²⁷

“rectification” or “God’s way of making things right,” I am signaling that I regard “righteousness” to be, in Paul’s view, more than a quality of God; it is God’s active, powerful intervention to redeem the whole of the cosmos. See especially J. Louis Martyn, “God’s Way of Making Right What Is Wrong,” in *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 141–56.

27. Notice John 21:18.