

# Introduction

Because Romans is the first Pauline letter in our NT canon, I begin with an introduction that may shed some light on the letters in general, although it is designed with Romans particularly in mind.

## READING LETTERS

In the past, some scholars made much of the difference between “letters” and “epistles,” placing Paul’s in the former category to show their proximity to most surviving ancient letters (from Egyptian papyri) rather than literary letters. While Paul did not belong to the elite circles of leisured letter writers like Cicero or Pliny, he did not simply compose his major letters, like Romans, off the top of his head. Given the time necessary to take normal dictation in antiquity (shorthand being unavailable), Paul may have taken over eleven hours to dictate this letter to Tertius, its scribe (Rom 16:22).<sup>1</sup> Since such a major undertaking probably involved more than one draft (and Paul could draw on his preaching experience), the final draft may have taken less than this estimate, but the total time invested in the letter was probably greater. Given the cost of papyrus and of the labor required (though Tertius, a believer, might have donated his services), one scholar estimates the cost of Romans at 20.68 denarii, which he calculates as roughly \$2275 in recent US currency.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Paul did not simply offer this project as an afterthought; Romans is a carefully premeditated work.

As we shall note below, Romans is no ordinary letter; it is a sophisticated argument. The average ancient papyrus letter was 87 words; the orator Cicero was more long-winded, averaging 295 words (with as many as 2530 words); and the philosopher Seneca averaged 995 words (with as many as 4134). The extant letters attributed to Paul average 2495 words,

1. Richards 2004: 165.

2. Richards 2004: 169.

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while Romans, his longest, has 7114 words.<sup>3</sup> Because ancient urban argumentation typically involved rhetoric, we shall explore possible connections with rhetoric below.

One characteristic of letters that is surely relevant here is that authors expected the specified audience of their letters to understand them. Whether authors always communicated adequately or readers always understood adequately is another question, but most authors at least tried to communicate so as to be clearly understood. Paul thus writes to his audience in Greek. (Greek was the first language of many non-Italians in Rome, including the majority of Jews and of Christian ministers who had come from the east; only in the second century is it clear that many lower-class, Latin-speaking Romans joined the church.) Paul also apparently writes with what he assumes will be shared cultural assumptions regarding language and concepts that he uses without detailed explanation. Informing ourselves about these shared cultural assumptions will help us understand his language; this objective is one of the primary purposes of this commentary (like many others). Better understanding the local situation in Rome does not mean that Paul would expect the principles he articulates there to be applicable there only; he does, after all, apply many of the same principles to other situations in other congregations. But noting these situations will help us better understand his argument and better identify the principles he is applying.

### PAUL AND RHETORIC

Scholars today often read Paul's letters in light of ancient rhetoric, a mostly positive development. Although some scholars have carried rhetorical analysis too far, as we shall observe, the development is mostly positive because ancient rhetoric offers a much more concrete basis for analyzing Paul's arguments than modern guesses would.

Two forms of advanced education existed in the Greco-Roman world: philosophy and rhetoric. The former concerned itself especially with truth and reality, and the latter with communication and persuasion. Despite traditional, stereotypical hostility between the two disciplines, most educated people recognized the value in and made use of both. Nevertheless, rhetoric was the dominant discipline, being considered more practical for

3. Anderson 1999: 113, noting that Paul departed from conventional epistolary expectations here (cf. also Malherbe 1977: 16; Demetrius *Eloc.* 4.228).

public life (politics, speeches in the courts, and so forth). Although only a small minority of people had advanced training of any kind, rhetoric pervaded society and shaped the way urban people thought and argued. Not only could passersby listen to speakers practicing in the marketplace, but oratory dominated civic assemblies and was even the subject of some public competitions.

Because such oratorical training became even more dominant in the second century, church fathers often read Paul in light of rhetoric, and Renaissance and Reformation interpreters like Melancthon continued this practice. By the higher rhetorical standards of the second century, Paul was not an expert rhetorician, but he probably fared better by the standards of his era. Despite objections to his delivery (cf. 1 Cor 2:3; 2 Cor 10:10; 11:6), Paul's letters include numerous rhetorical devices that would have been familiar to his contemporaries. In fact, Paul might have over-compensated to silence his critics; rhetoricians (such as Cicero) tended to limit rhetorical devices in letters, which were intended to be more like conversation than public speech.

Where scholars have overplayed rhetoric is in seeking to structure Paul's letters as if they were speeches. Rhetorical handbooks in this period do not address letters, but when they later do, they do not treat them like speeches. Most genuine speeches do not fit the precise outlines we find in rhetorical handbooks, and we should expect such outlines to prove even less relevant to letters. They do not even fit the letters of rhetorically sophisticated letter writers like Cicero, Pliny, or Fronto.

Nevertheless, Paul's extant letters are not normal letters (though they are comparable in some ways to some letter-essays, e.g., by Seneca).<sup>4</sup> While Paul often includes conversational elements, many of his letters include substantial *argumentation*—which was characteristically the domain of rhetoric rather than of letters. While rhetoric may rarely provide us detailed outlines for his letters, therefore, it does provide abundant insights into how Paul argues his case.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars differ as to whether Paul had any rhetorical training or simply absorbed practices dominant in his environment.<sup>6</sup> Certainly Paul did

4. The comparison is limited; see Elliott 2008: 17.

5. For some recent nuanced discussions of Paul and rhetoric, see e.g., Porter 1997: 561–67, 584–85; Reed 1997: 182–91; Anderson 1999: 114–26, 280–81; Bird 2008; Keener 2008b: 221.

6. For Paul having more training than many suppose, see Hock 2003.

not have advanced (tertiary) training in a Greek rhetorical school with the goal of becoming a Greek orator; orators exhibited their skills by lavishly citing classical Greek texts, which appear in Paul only very rarely. By contrast, many of Paul's letters (notably including Romans) lavishly display the Jewish Scriptures, typically in the forms dominant in the Greek Diaspora. Paul's display of biblical knowledge suggests the combination of a brilliant mind with the best of training in the Scriptures, probably in the ancient world's best center for such training, namely Jerusalem. If Paul, presumably from a well-off family who could afford such training, studied with Gamaliel in Greek (as suggested in Acts 22:3; cf. *t. Sotah* 15:8), he probably also had some additional training in delivering sermons in acceptable Greek style. Today's equivalent might be advanced study in Bible with a few homiletics courses. If so, Paul masterfully developed the basic skills he received at this level of training.

If Paul used Greek techniques because they were a part of the milieu in which he and Diaspora Judaism (and to a somewhat reduced extent, Palestinian Judaism) moved, Paul's more specifically "Jewish" context informs what he would have viewed as the core of his cultural identity (cf. Rom 9:1–5; 11:1).

### **PAUL, JUDAISM, AND THE LAW**

When we speak of Paul and "Judaism," we are usually thinking in anachronistic terms. Paul, like most of the earliest Christian movement even in the Diaspora, was Jewish. Modern Western readers distinguish "Judaism" and "Christianity" as distinct religions, but the Christian movement, as it came to be called, viewed itself as carrying on the biblical faith of patriarchs and prophets in view of end-time fulfillment in Christ, demonstrated by the eschatological gift of the Spirit.

As scholars today emphasize, first-century Judaism was itself highly diverse; some even speak of "Judaisms" (though emphasizing the wide variation in Jewish practice should make the point sufficiently). Its rabbinic form (which evolved into traditional Orthodox Judaism as we know it today) evolved from Pharisaism, but that evolution postdates Paul's ministry. Paul's faith is, in a sense, an earlier development of Pharisaism (albeit a minority one) than rabbinic Judaism is, as some Jewish scholars have recently pointed out. Jews as a people affirmed circumcision, the temple, the Torah, and other traits (many of these, like distinctive food

customs, highlighted over the previous two centuries as costly marks of distinctive Jewish identity). Yet some (more often in the Holy Land) expected the imminent end of the age, whereas others denied it. The degree of Jewish Diaspora assimilation to the surrounding culture varied from one place to another and according to the attitudes of their host cultures.<sup>7</sup> Views about messianic figures varied more widely than we have space to narrate here. Paul has been compared to apocalyptic, mystic, and Pharisaic streams of Judaism, among others.

### E. P. Sanders on “the Law”

The dominant current arguments surrounding Paul’s relationship with his Jewish context most relevant to Romans however, involve his own approach to the law versus that of his contemporaries. Views of Paul’s relationship to what we call Judaism have varied widely over the centuries, from Marcion’s proto-gnostic Paul (who rejected anything Jewish) to W. D. Davies’ Paul (who was a Pharisee who believed that the messianic era had dawned). Most scholars today would agree more with Davies than Marcion, but some aspects of Paul’s relation to Judaism—and the character of ancient Judaism—remain debated.

E. P. Sanders’s work *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, published in 1977, shook New Testament scholarship in general and Pauline studies in particular. Many New Testament scholars (particularly in the German scholarly tradition—at least according to Anglophone scholars), depicted Judaism as legalistic and seeking to be justified by works. (This grid for reading the sources persisted from debates at the time of the Reformation.) Scholars of Judaism had long challenged the sufficiency of such a paradigm (which pervaded works like Strack-Billerbeck’s widely-used rabbinic commentary on the New Testament),<sup>8</sup> but it was Sanders’s forceful polemic that shook the old paradigm. He argued that nearly all of ancient Judaism affirmed that Israelites as a whole were graciously chosen as part of the covenant, and remained members of the covenant unless

7. For one typology regarding assimilation, accommodation, and acculturation, see Barclay 1995.

8. Earlier scholars with more nuanced views include Moore (1971) and Bonsirven (1964); in Pauline scholarship, Longenecker (1976) also showed analogies in a covenant nomist pattern in Paul’s and other early Jewish thought.

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cutting themselves off through apostasy. Judaism was thus a religion of grace, and works confirmed rather than earned a place in the covenant.

One complication of revisiting ancient Judaism's approach to works and grace is that one must then revisit Paul's approach to the views of his contemporaries on these matters. Paul does in fact sound like he regards his contemporaries' approach as based on human effort rather than grace, so New Testament scholars set out to reinterpret Paul based on this new interpretation of ancient Judaism. Many found Sanders's reconstruction of ancient Judaism more plausible than his interpretation of Paul, but James D. G. Dunn, Hans Hübner, Heikki Räisänen, Francis Watson, N. T. Wright, and others also offered new readings of Paul in his Jewish setting.<sup>9</sup> Some of these new interpretations became known as the "New Perspective," but the new perspectives are in fact so diverse on various points of detail that the main characteristic of their newness is that they reject the older caricature of Judaism.

While Sanders's challenge to caricatures of Judaism proved to be an important watershed, many of the details of his approach have come under increasing challenge. Sanders's primary thesis, the prevalence of grace in Judaism (and perhaps especially rabbinic Judaism, where it was often least appreciated), won the day, and there is little likelihood, barring a nuclear holocaust or other cataclysmic event that wipes out the current generation of scholars and our work, that the bulk of NT scholarship will backtrack on that point. Yet scholars have increasingly noticed that another side of the picture, "works righteousness," remains in the Jewish sources. A number of scholars argue that Sanders's way of framing the questions (in response to more traditional ways of framing them) and arranging the data downplayed the sources' emphasis on earning merit or even eschatological salvation.<sup>10</sup>

9. See e.g., Räisänen 1983; Hübner 1984; Dunn 1992; Watson 2007.

10. Among other works, see e.g., Gathercole 2002; Thielman 1987, 1994; Talbert 2001; Cairus 2004; Seifrid 1992: 78–135; Quarles 1996; Hagner 1993; Eskola 1998: 28–60; idem 2002; Carson, O'Brien, and Seifrid 2001; esp. Avemarie 1996 (particularly 36–43); see also discussion in Bird 2007. Sanders 2009 has forcefully reiterated and explained what he intended as the primary *point* of his argument; for the weighty intellectual history of his approach, see Sanders 2008: 18–25.