

Paul's Letter to the Romans

01. Introduction



Re the 'Acts of the Apostles' by Luke

Luke was a close companion of Paul in his mission.

Luke was a historian: 'I have decided, after investigating everything carefully, to write an orderly account for you so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (Luke 1:3-4).

First century historians used all the tools of rhetoric to impress the reader, and they were expected to create speeches, but only after 'investigating everything carefully.'

born in Tarsus

“I am from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of an important city” (Acts 21:39).

According to Jerome (died c.420), Paul’s parents emigrated to Tarsus from Gischala in Galilee (*Commentary on Philemon* 23-24).

He refers to himself in his Letter to Philemon (c.54AD) as a προεσβύτης (in his 50’s).



Saul was a Jew

‘I was circumcised on the eighth day’ (Philippians 3:5).

- In his Letter to the Philippians (3:5), he refers to himself as ‘a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews.’
- Given the name ‘Saul’ (Acts 7:58). In all his letters he calls himself ‘Paul’. Luke refers to him as ‘Paul’ only after the meeting with the proconsul of Cyprus, Sergius Paulus (Acts 13:7). Did they share a family name, or did the proconsul offer him patronage?

- He was a 'Pharisee' (Philippians 3:5; see Acts 26:5)
- He studied in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, 'educated strictly according to our ancestral Law' (Acts 22:3).
- He inherited Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28).

33AD

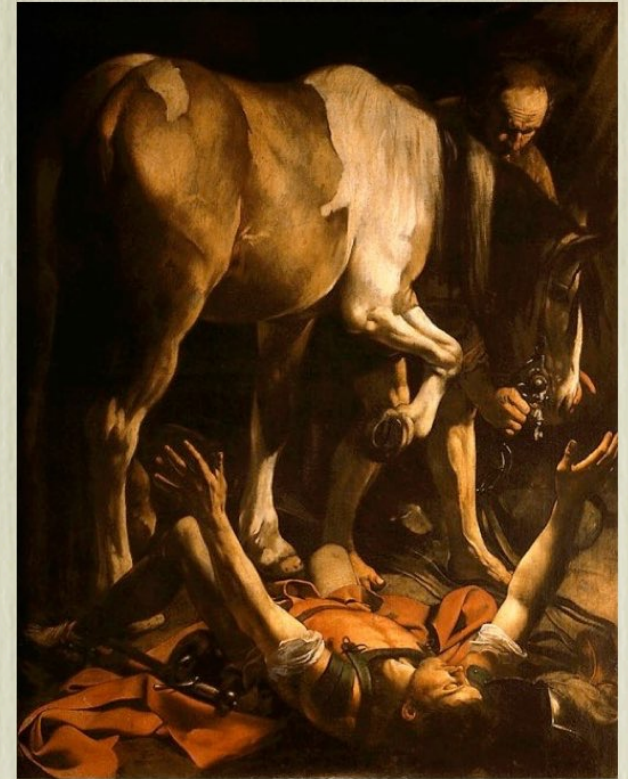
‘The members of the council dragged Stephen out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man (νεανίας, 37?) named **Saul**. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he died. And **Saul** approved of their killing him’ (Acts 7:58-60)

- Paul claims to have been ‘intensely zealous in persecuting the Church of God and was trying to **destroy it**’ (Galatians 1:13; see Philippians 3:6; Acts 9:1-2, 22:4, 26:9-11).

34AD

His Encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:13-18).

‘As Saul was approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do”



Acts 9:3-6

‘Have I not seen the Lord’ (1 Corinthians 9:1).

‘He was seen also by me’ (1 Corinthians 15:8).

‘I received the Gospel through a revelation of Jesus Christ’ (Galatians 1:12).

‘God called me through his grace and was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles’ (Galatians 1:15-16).

Acts 9:17-19

‘Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptised, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. For several days he was with the disciples in Damascus.’

‘I went away at once to Arabia,
and afterwards I returned to
Damascus’ (Galatians 1:17).

‘Arabia’ (The Nabataean kingdom)
(Acts 9:20-25)



37AD

‘In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas guarded the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands’ (2 Cor 11:32-33).

Saul pays a short visit to Jerusalem ‘to talk things over with Cephas’ (Galatians 1:18)

37-45AD

‘Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia, and I was still unknown by sight to the churches of Judea that are in Christ; they only heard it said, “The one who formerly was persecuting us is now proclaiming the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:21-23).



46AD

‘Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. So it was that for an entire year they met with the church and taught a great many people’ (Acts 11:25-26).

Saul visits Jerusalem with Barnabas and Silas and confers with Peter, John & James concerning conditions for accepting Gentiles into the Christian community (Galatians 2:1-10; Acts 11:27-30)

47AD

Sent on mission

Acts 13:1-4

‘In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers ... While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus.’

48AD

‘They sailed back to **Antioch**, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed’ (Acts 14:26).



Acts 14:27-28

When they arrived back at Antioch, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.



Acts 15:1-2

Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.

48AD

Paul writes from Antioch to Galatia

Letter to the Galatians

49AD

Shortly after writing to the Galatians Paul went with Barnabas to the [Assembly in Jerusalem](#) which decided that Gentiles could be welcomed into the community as Gentiles.

To help harmony in a Christian community of Jews and Gentiles, the Council concluded that the Gentiles should follow only the instructions in Leviticus that applied to Gentiles living in a Jewish territory.

Gentiles were asked to abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from πορνεία.

49AD

Paul returns to Galatia, accompanied by Silas. They are joined by Timothy.

Acts 16:11

Mission to Macedonia

‘We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi.’



Acts 17:1

They left Philippi and came to Thessalonica.



They were forced to leave the Via Egnatia and escape to Beroea

But when the Jews of Thessalonica learned that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Beroea as well, they came there too, to stir up and incite the crowds. Then the believers immediately sent Paul away to the coast, but Silas and Timothy remained behind. Those who conducted Paul brought him as far as **Athens**; and after receiving instructions to have Silas and Timothy join him as soon as possible, they left him.

Acts 17:13-15



‘After a brief stay in Athens **Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.**’ (Acts 18:1).



We know from a letter written by his brother, Seneca, that **Gallio** [Acts 18:12-16] retired before the completion of his term, so it is reasonable to assume that he left Corinth as soon as the sailing season opened in the spring of 52.

Acts 18:11, 18

Paul stayed there a year and six months ... He said farewell to the believers and sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila.

It would seem that Paul arrived in Corinth before the onset of winter in the year 50 and left at the same time as Gallio in the spring of 52.

Letters to the Christian community in Thessalonica

52AD

‘Paul sailed for Syria, accompanied by Priscilla and Aquila ... When they reached Ephesus he left them’ (Acts 18:18-19).



Acts 18:21 – 19:1

52AD

‘Paul set sail from Ephesus, landed at Caesarea and went up to Jerusalem ... and then down to Antioch. After spending some time there, he departed and went from place to place through the region of Galatia and Phrygia ... and came to Ephesus.



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Ephesus: 52-55AD

Letters from Ephesus

First Corinthians 53AD

Philemon 54AD

Colossians 54AD



Acts 20:1

Paul left Ephesus for Macedonia via Troas (55).



‘When I came to Troas to proclaim the good news of Christ, a door was opened for me in the Lord; but my mind could not rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said farewell to them and went on to Macedonia’ (2 Corinthians 2:12-13).

After spending the winter of 55-56 among the communities which he had founded in Macedonia five years previously (Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea), it seems that during 56 he carried out a wider mission in the area. He mentions in his Letter to the Romans, written from Corinth during the winter of 56-57, that he had journeyed as far as Illyricum (Romans 15:19; Acts 20:2). The Via Egnatia would have taken him from Philippi or Thessalonica to Apollonia on the Adriatic coast. It is quite a short journey north to Illyricum (Dalmatia).

2 Corinthians 1-9
(from Macedonia 55)

2 Corinthians 10-13
(from Macedonia 56)



‘Paul came to Greece where he stayed for three months’ (Acts 20:1-2).

Letter to the Romans



Luke tells us that while still in Ephesus, Paul discerned in prayer (**‘in the Spirit’**) that Christ wanted him to **‘go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then to go on to Jerusalem. He said: “After I have gone there, I must also see Rome”**’ (Acts 19:21).

It is clear from the list of greetings with which Paul concludes the letter that the community in Rome included Jews and Gentiles. This is clear also from the content of the letter. We have evidence that there were Jews in Rome as early as the second century BC. Their numbers were greatly swelled by the prisoners of war brought back as slaves by Pompey when he took control of Judah in 63BC and incorporated it into the province of Syria. Fifty thousand has been suggested as the Jewish population of Rome in the middle of the first century BC, composed mainly of slaves, or ex-slaves (freedmen), and merchants.

We have no direct information about the origins of Christianity in Rome, though we do know that the community had close ties with Jerusalem. It is possible that Christianity was introduced by pilgrims present in Jerusalem during the first Pentecost after Jesus' death (see Acts 2:10,41). It may have been introduced by Jewish-Christian slaves in the household of Aristobulus or Narcissus (see 16:10-11). It is unlikely that Peter was in Rome in 56AD. If he was, Paul gives no indication of having heard about it; and Luke says nothing of it in Acts.

It is important to realise that we have no evidence that there had been a break between Christians and Jews in Rome at the time Paul is writing. The final chapter of Acts gives the opposite impression. It may well be that the Jewish Christians and the 'righteous Gentiles' who had come to Christianity through them were still meeting in the synagogue and relating to the wider Jewish community. In fact it is hard to see how they could have met in any other way within the restrictions of Roman law.

Paul's focus is on the universality of God's plan of salvation and the critical importance of Jews and Gentiles living in communion in the love of Christ, respectful of each other and accepting each other with all their differences.

The fear of a complete break between Gentile and Jewish Christians continues to haunt Paul. It would have broken his heart had he been able to see what happened subsequently to Jewish Christianity and the wedge that came between a dominantly Gentile Christianity and Judaism. It was unthinkable for Paul to have Christians almost assuming, as most today do, that Christianity and Judaism are different religions.

Free from the need to respond to questions or to clarify earlier teaching, Paul is able to present a sustained argument concerning the relationship of Jews and Gentiles in the design of God. It is this divine design that has been revealed to Paul and that he has been chosen as an apostle to proclaim. Both Jews and Gentiles need the grace that God is offering through Jesus. Without it both remain locked in a cycle of sin from which there is no escape. It is particularly to the Gentiles in the community that Paul addresses his words, for he wants them to realise what they owe to Judaism.

Any failure to respect Judaism, any failure to recognise God's fidelity to his choice of Israel, any behaviour that would cause Jews to reject Christianity as alien, would work only to hinder God's plan of salvation, and hurt the communion in love for which Jesus gave his life.

Paul knew that certain Jews had rejected Jesus. He was constantly suffering a similar rejection and he is clearly anxious about his forthcoming visit to Jerusalem (15:30-32). People will reject Christianity for their own reasons. Here he is concerned only that the reason for the rejection must not be the behaviour of Christians.

He does not presume to be telling Jews something which they do not already know. Rather, he builds a careful argument on premises which he assumes his readers accept. He has abundant backing from the prophets in naming the sins of Jews who are unfaithful to the covenant, including those who rely on their own good works rather than grace to find salvation. He is not accusing Judaism of this fault. Rather, he looks at Judaism at its best, shows how many Jews have failed to live it, and presents God's action in Jesus as being consistent with what God has offered in Judaism.

Paul wants to show that Judaism at its best points towards and finds fulfilment in Christianity. Jews who were attracted to Jesus faced a major problem: how could they follow Jesus while remaining faithful to God whose will is expressed in the law (the Torah)? Paul wants to demonstrate that there is a power, a presence, a love and a Spirit offered to them in Jesus which enables them, in true fidelity to the law, to go beyond its limits and to reach its goal.

Paul's focus is on the love of God, the love seen in Jesus, the love that is God's gift experienced in the Christian community, the love which draws Jew and Gentile together. He wants to show that this love is the fulfilling of the law, and that a faithful Jew can be fully obedient to God by belonging to the Christian community, and by looking to Jesus to learn from him what it means to love with the love of God who loves all people without distinction of race.

To read Romans, therefore, we must be prepared to have exposed any vestiges of racism or superiority that infect our thinking or our behaviour. Paul will challenge us to open our hearts to the all-embracing love that is God and that we see revealed in the heart of Jesus on the cross. It is this love, and this love alone, that characterises what is essential to Christianity. Anything less will betray it. Hence our need for prayer, for only the Spirit of the risen Jesus can enable God's will to be effective in our personal and communal lives. It is to this mission that Paul is committed and it is from this conviction that he writes.