

Bible Study Romans
By Fr. John Brown

The city of Rome in Paul's time:



Paul's Epistle was addressed to the Christian community in the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. At the time of the writing of this Epistle, the Roman Empire was at the peak of its power. It was a time later called "Pax Romana" – Latin for "the peace of Rome" which prevailed between 27 BC and 180 AD.

Rome had existed as a power for centuries earlier. It began as one of several small nation states in Italy. In the 7th century BC, when its people defeated a foreign invasion, and began to conquer its own neighboring states. By the 6th century BC, Rome had established itself with attributes that would characterize it for future centuries: a powerful military, government by a senate, a code of law that was well-advanced for its day, and a genius for civil engineering.



In the first century when the book of Romans was written, the Roman Empire was the greatest power on earth. They had already defeated and subjugated several other great world powers before them, such as Greeks, the Egyptians, the Carthaginians, and the Babylonians, and the Gauls. The city of Rome had about one million residents, and was the extraordinarily wealthy, whose riches were derived from conquests and trade. Much of their wealth was also the result of slavery, mostly drawn from the civilizations they had conquered. It is estimated that 25-40% of the citizens of Rome were slaves.



There was an extreme wealth gap in ancient Rome. At the top were the aristocrats, who were extremely wealthy. At the bottom of society were the slaves, who owned nothing and were often treated brutally. In between was a class free people (including those freed from slavery) called “plebes,” who eked out a living with little chance of advancement. By the first century, the plebes had grown dissatisfied with the social arrangement. They disliked the unfairness, the corruption, capriciousness, and brutality from their unaccountable elites, which they witnessed every day.

This widespread negative perception of Roman society laid the groundwork for Christianity. The city of Rome and its Empire was a place of routine injustice, oppression, violence, and hopelessness for most. When Christianity arrived, teaching love for all people, equality of all people, love for all people, peace instead violence, forgiveness instead vengeance, and promise of blissful heaven, Roman ears were ready to hear this “Good News.”

Rome was originally was a Republic, governed by its Senate, a body of aristocrats who received their positions based on noble birth and wealth. But the first century BC, the Roman Republic underwent chaos as various factions of the Senate competed for power. Finally, in 27 BC, Augustus Caesar attained complete control over all Roman government, became the first Emperor, and Rome passed from a Republic to Empire. The previous Senate remained, but was merely a figurehead.



Roman religion was entirely pagan. They believed in many gods and goddesses. None of their deities were all-powerful, but each had strong influence over some specific aspect of Roman life. For example, they had Mars as the god of war, Vesta was the goddess of family and the home, Saturn was the god of agriculture, abundance, prosperity and peace, Neptune was the god of the sea, and Aphrodite was the goddess of sexuality and beauty. Roman religion was largely copied from their predecessors the Greeks, whose gods, goddesses and myths they often copied.

Greek name	Transliteration	Roman name
Ζεύς	Zeús	Iupiter, Iove
Αθηνᾶ	Athēnā	Minerva
Ἥρᾱ	Hēra	Iuno
Ποσειδῶν	Poseidōn	Neptunus
Ἑρμῆς	Hermēs	Mercurius
Ἀπόλλων	Apóllōn	Apollo
Ἄρτεμις	Ártemis	Diana
Ἥφαιστος	Hēphaistos	Vulcanus
Ἀφροδίτη	Aphrodītē	Venus
Ἄρης	Árēs	Mars
Δημήτηρ	Dēmētēr	Ceres
Διόνυσος	Diónysos	Bacchus
Ἑστία	Hestía	Vesta
Ἅδης	Hádēs	Pluto
Ἔρως	Ērōs	Cupid
Περσεφόνη	Persephónē	Proserpina

Like the religions of all other Mediterranean cultures, Roman religion was mostly a matter of placating the gods and goddesses with sacrifices. Romans offered sacrifices of mostly animals, and sometimes people, to appease their deities. They did not love their gods and goddesses, and did not believe the gods and goddesses loved them. Roman deities were not a source of morality. Roman mythology described them as selfish, petty, vengeful, and manipulative. As a result, Roman people had no moral compass, and were world-famous for their drunkenness and debauchery.

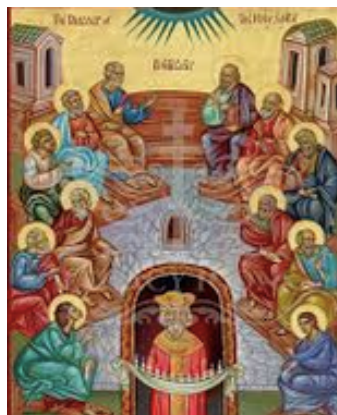


In the middle of the 4th century, Romans began to hear of a new religion. It began in the small Roman province of Judea as a sect of Judaism, which was well-known. But this new Jewish sect quickly spread, and won a majority of non-Jews as converts. Its founder was Jesus of Nazareth, the lowly son of carpenter, who gained a large following in the province. He was a powerful preacher, teacher, and worker of many astonishing miracles. The leaders of His own Jewish people turned on Him, and convinced the local Roman authorities to execute him by crucifixion. Rather than extinguishing His group of followers,

His death energized them. They announced that He had risen from the dead, and began preaching a new faith in His name.



The belief in a resurrected Jesus of Nazareth grew exponentially when another miracle occurred soon after. In the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, crowded with pilgrims from all over the Empire celebrating the Jewish feast of Pentecost, witnessed a spectacular miracle. Jesus followers began prophesying in an unknown language. Supernatural flames appeared on their heads. The huge crowd heard the strange prophecies and understood it in their own language. It was an ecstatic praise of the God of the Jews, but also of His newly revealed Son, Jesus. The result was a mass conversion of the onlookers to become followers of this Jesus. The earliest written account of this event gives the nationalities of those who witnessed this event: *“And how is it that we hear, each in our own language in which we were born? Parthians and Medes and Elamites, those dwelling in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya adjoining Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs...”* (Acts 2:8-11)



These eyewitnesses and converts returned to their homelands and began to proclaim the miracle they had seen and the Jesus they had embraced. Many of them were Jews living abroad, who returned to their synagogues and shared when they had experienced. Others were Gentiles who told the story to their families and friends. Among the places listed in the written account was Rome, which is important to our study of the book of Romans. It

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was to the Christians in this colossal city that Paul wrote his letter about 25 years after the Resurrection and Pentecost.

The origins of the Christian community at Rome are unclear. Contrary to popular belief, it was not founded by the Apostle Peter. He first went to the Antioch, the major city of Syria. Paul wrote, “Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him to his face...” (Galatians 2:11). The early Church historian Eusebius lists several places Peter visited before coming to Rome: “Peter appears to have preached in Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia to the Jews of the dispersion” (Church History Book III, Chapter 1). Eusebius also identifies Peter as the first bishop Antioch: “...also Ignatius, who was chosen bishop of Antioch, second in succession to Peter, and whose fame is still celebrated by a great many” (III, 36).

Paul did not found the Church of Rome either. In his Epistle to the Christian community already existing in Rome, he had clearly not traveled to Rome yet: “...now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established— that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me” (Romans 1:10-12).

Also, the book of Acts records in detail Paul’s missionary journeys. His first three journeys do not include a stop in Rome. In his fourth and final missionary journey, Rome is his destination where he insisted to be tried as Roman citizen. “...if there is nothing in these things of which these men accuse me, no one can deliver me to them. I appeal to Caesar.” Then Festus, when he had conferred with the council, answered, “You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!” (Acts 25:11-12).

Although the Christian community in Rome was not founded by Peter and Paul, they both certainly arrived there, and established it. Both were martyred there, Peter in 64 and Paul between 64 and 68 AD.

In Rome at the time of Paul’s writing, the primary language was Latin. But throughout the Roman Empire, the Greek language was widely spoken, at least as a second language. This is because, in the 4th century BC, Alexander the Great conquered a vast territory across the Eastern world.



As a Greek-speaking Macedonian, he left behind an empire that strongly influenced the conquered territories with the Greek language and culture. Although Western Europe was not conquered by Alexander, it was also influenced by Hellenism. When the Roman Empire arose soon after Alexander, it deeply respected his legacy. Most educated Romans learned Greek and studied the Greek philosophers. Even common people understood some Greek. At the time of the first century, Greek was almost a universal language throughout the Empire.

This was extremely providential for the early Church. Judea had been conquered by Alexander, and by the first century AD was a small and insignificant province of the Roman Empire. Yet even the working-class Apostles were already proficient in Greek. So when they spread out throughout the Mediterranean world to preach the Gospel, they could preach and teach to nearly any audience in Greek, and most of the audience could understand them in Greek, from Egypt to Armenia to the borders of India. And when the Apostle Paul wrote his epistle to the Christian community in Rome, he did so in Greek (not Latin), but was well understood by its Roman readers. The Epistle to the Romans was written around 57-59 AD.

The original readers were already Christians. There was a large Jewish community in Rome at the time, and Jewish converts were certainly among the readers. They would have understood Christ as the fulfillment of the Messiah, and Paul's many references from the Hebrew Bible. The other original readers of Romans were converts from paganism. Their new Christian faith called them to replace polytheism for the one God and Jesus Christ, animal sacrifices for the Eucharist, extorting one's neighbor for loving them, and hedonism for controlling their fleshly passions.

Of all Paul's epistles, Romans is densely packed with doctrine. One of the founding principles of Rome was its respect for the rule of law. Paul wrote his doctrinal epistle to appeal to Rome's juridical mindset. Its language, style and structure resemble that of an extended legal brief. He employs the courtroom technique of dichotomies throughout: *"Law vs grace, faith vs works, Old Testament vs New Testament, nature vs. grace, spirit vs body, reality vs symbol, God's faithfulness vs. humanity's faithfulness, secular vs. sacred,*

living faith vs. dead faith, living works vs dead works, good vs. evil, righteous vs unrighteous, natural vs unnatural...” (Orthodox Study Bible).

The book is divided into five parts:

1. *“God’s faithfulness to all (chapters 1-4)*
2. *Faithful union between God and His Church (chapters 5-8)*
3. *God’s faithfulness to Jew and Gentile (chapters 9-11)*
4. *Living out a faithful relationship with God (chapters 12-15*
5. *Conclusion and Greetings (chapter 6)” (Orthodox Study Bible)*

NO CLASS NEXT WEEK (May 29)!
WE WILL RESUME THE FOLLOWING WEEK (June 5).