THE ROMANS DEBATE—CONTINUED
by F F BRUCE, MA, DD, FBA
EMERITUS PROFESSOR IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

I. INTRODUCTION

The title of this lecture was suggested by the title of a symposium edited by Karl Paul Donfried and published in 1977 as The Romans Debate. This symposium brings together ten essays composed and published over the previous thirty years. The first of these essays originated as a lecture delivered by Professor T. W. Manson in the John Rylands Library in February 1948 and published in the Library’s Bulletin, later in the same year, under the title ‘St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans—and Others’. It seems, therefore, specially appropriate to devote this twenty-first Manson Memorial Lecture to the continuation of the debate.

The ‘Romans debate’ is the debate about the character of the letter (including questions about its literary integrity, the possibility of its having circulated in longer and shorter recensions, the destination of chapter 16) and, above all, Paul’s purpose in sending it. This lecture confines itself mainly to the last of these issues. With regard to other questions, suffice it to say that the lecture presupposes the literary integrity of the document (from Romans 1:1 to at least 16:23) as a letter addressed to the Christians of Rome, and the probability that a later editor (Marcion, it appears) issued a shorter recension of it which has influenced the textual tradition but has no relevance for our understanding of the original work or for the destination of chapter 16.

Since that symposium was published, further contributions have been made to the debate. A few distinguished new commentaries on Romans have appeared; among them, in

1 The Manson Memorial Lecture delivered in the University of Manchester on 19 November 1981.
4 Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, The Epistle to the Romans, i–ii, ICC (Edinburgh, 1972–9); E. Käsemann, Commentary on Romans, E.T. (London, 1980); H. Schlier, Der Römerbrief, HTK (Freiburg, 1977); U. Wilckens, Der Brief an die Römer, EKK (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1978–).
relation to our present subject, special mention should be made of Ulrich Wilckens’ work in the Evangelisch-Katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament. Apart from commentaries, there is an important monograph by Dr Harry Gamble on *The Textual History of the Letter to the Romans*.\(^1\) Here the various textual phenomena which Professor Manson discussed in his lecture of 1948 are reviewed afresh; the problem of chapter 16 is dealt with among others and answered—conclusively, in my judgement—in favour of a Roman destination. In fact I think that C. H. Dodd said as much as needed to be said on this subject in his Moffatt Commentary on Romans in 1932,\(^2\) but Dr Gamble has dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s of the case for Rome.

On several aspects of the Romans debate there is widespread agreement. When Paul dictated the letter he had completed ten years of apostolic activity both east and west of the Aegean Sea. In the great cities of South Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and proconsular Asia the gospel had been preached and churches had been founded. Most recently Illyricum also had been visited. Paul now reckoned that his work in the eastern Mediterranean area was at an end: ‘I no longer have any room for work in these regions’, he said (Romans 15:23). He was essentially a pioneer, making it his ambition to preach the gospel where the name of Christ had never been heard before. But where around the Mediterranean shores could he find such a place in the later fifties of the first century? Paul was not the only Christian missionary in the Gentile world, though he was the greatest, and several Mediterranean lands which he had not visited had probably been evangelized by others. But Spain, the oldest Roman province after Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica,\(^3\) remained unevangelized; Paul

---

3. Spain was annexed and organized as two Roman provinces (Hispania Citerior and Hispania Ulterior) in 197 BC, soon after the Second Punic War. Sicily was the first Roman province, annexed in 241 BC, at the end of the First Punic War; Sardinia and Corsica were annexed shortly afterwards (238 BC), and were administered as one province from 231 BC to the beginning of the fourth century AD.
resolved that he would be the first to take the gospel there. To
Spain, then, he turned his eyes.
A journey to Spain would give him the opportunity of gratifying
a long-cherished desire to visit Rome. He had no thought of
settling down in Rome: it was no part of his policy to build, as he
said, on someone else’s foundation\(^1\) (we know what he thought
about certain people who invaded his mission-field and tried to
build on his foundation\(^2\)). But a stay in Rome would enable him to
enjoy the company of Christians in the capital and to renew
acquaintance with a number of friends whom he had met
elsewhere and who were now resident there. After his missionary
exertions in the east, and before he embarked on a fresh
campaign in the west, it would be a refreshing experience to
spend some time in Rome. No doubt there would be an
opportunity, during such a visit, to exercise his ministry as apostle
to the Gentiles.\(^3\) But any converts that he made by preaching the
gospel in Rome would be added to the Christian community
already existing in the city: there was no question of his forming
them into a separate Pauline church.

One thing only remained on his programme before he could
fulfil this plan. He had to go to Jerusalem with the delegates of
churches in his Gentile mission-field who were to hand over to the
leaders of the mother-church their churches’ contributions to a
relief fund which Paul had been organizing among them for some
years. When this business had been attended to, then, said Paul
to the Roman Christians, ‘I shall go on by way of you to Spain’
(Romans 15:28).

This, then, as may be gathered from information given in the
letter, was the occasion of Paul’s writing to the Christians of Rome.
The letter was sent from Corinth, early in (probably) AD 57.

But if the primary purpose of the letter was to prepare the
Roman Christians for Paul’s visit to them, how is that purpose
related to its main content? This question, indeed, is the crux of
the Roman debate, and an attempt will be made to answer it. In
trying to answer it, we shall bear in mind that Paul, while dictating
the letter, had three places specially in mind—Rome, the home of

\(^1\) Romans 15:20.
\(^2\) Cf. 1 Corinthians 3:10–15; 2 Corinthians 10:12–16.
\(^3\) Romans 1:13–15.
the people to whom the letter was addressed; Spain, where he planned shortly to inaugurate the next phase of his apostolic ministry; and Jerusalem, which he was to visit in the immediate future to complete a project very close to his heart. A consideration of these three places, one by one, should help us to come to terms with some important aspects of the Romans debate.

II. THREE PROSPECTIVE VISITS

1. Rome

This document is, in no merely nominal sense, Paul's letter to the Romans—a letter addressed, in all its parts, to a particular Christian community in a particular historical situation. Communications between Rome and the main centres of Paul's mission-field were good, and Paul was able to keep himself informed, through friends who visited Rome or were now resident there, of what was happening among the Christians of the capital.

It is plain from Paul's language that the Christian community in Rome was large and active, enjoying a good reputation among churches elsewhere in the Mediterranean world.¹

The origins of Christianity in Rome are obscure. The words of the fourth-century commentator called Ambrosiaster are frequently quoted in this regard: The Romans had embraced the faith of Christ, albeit according to the Jewish rite, although they saw no sign of mighty works nor any of the apostles.² We know too little about Ambrosiaster's sources of information to accept this as an authoritative statement, but it certainly agrees with such other evidence as we have, not least in relation to the Jewish base of early Roman Christianity.³

¹Romans 1:8; 15:14.
³This appears from non-literary (as well as literary) evidence, such as the indebtedness of early Christian catacombs to the Jewish catacombs of Rome (like that on Monteverde). As for literary evidence, the surviving influence of Jewish lustral practice in the Christian worship of Rome has been traced in Hippolytus, Apostolic Tradition 20.5, where a purificatory bath on Maundy Thursday is prescribed for those preparing to be baptized on Easter Day; cf. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, 'On the Baptismal Rite according to St. Hippolytus', Studia Patristica 4 = TU 54 (Berlin, 1957), pp. 93 ff.
It is probable that Christianity reached Rome within a few years of its inception, given the degree of social mobility in the Roman Empire in those days. The people most likely to take it to Rome were Hellenistic Jewish Christians, members of the group in which Stephen and Philip played a leading part. The name of the Synagogue of the Freedmen in Jerusalem, with which Stephen was associated, suggests a link with Rome (if the libertini in question were the descendants of Jews who were taken as captives to Rome by Pompey to grace his triumph in 61 BC and subsequently emancipated). The introduction of Christianity into the Jewish community of Rome was bound to lead to the same kind of disputes as its introduction into other Jewish communities; and if such disputes played their part in the constant tumults in which, according to Suetonius, the Jews of Rome were indulging (adsidue tumultuantes) in the principate of Claudius, we can understand his further remark that these tumults were stirred up by ‘Chrestus’ (impulsore Chresto).

We have ample evidence for the use of Chrestus/Χρηστός and Chrestiani/Χρηστιανοί, in Latin and Greek alike, as mis-spellings for Christus/Χριστός and Christiani/Χριστιανοί. It is about as certain as can be with such an allusion that the person referred to is Jesus Christ. Had he been another, otherwise unknown, bearer of the name Chrestus, Suetonius would probably have said impulsore Chresto quodam. It is not at all likely that the reference is to another messianic claimant, a rival Christ—e.g. Simon Magus (whose presence in Rome under Claudius is attested elsewhere).
There is no evidence that Simon Magus claimed to be the Messiah, and in any case a pagan writer would not have said *impulsore Chresto* if he had meant 'at the instigation of a Messiah'—Chrestus for Suetonius was a personal name, as it was for pagans in general.

True, Jesus Christ was not in Rome during the principate of Claudius. But Suetonius may well have understood his sources (wrongly) to mean that he was. Tacitus knew that Christ was executed under Tiberius, but Suetonius had not the same concern for historical precision. If his sources told him that the rioting among the Jews of Rome was caused by disagreement about the claims of Christ, it was a natural, if mistaken, inference that Christ himself was in Rome at the time.

It was because of these riots, says Suetonius, that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome. He does not date the expulsion edict: Orosius, early in the fifth century, says that it was issued in AD 49. Orosius's inaccuracy in the very act of supplying this information does not inspire confidence, but the record of Acts makes AD 49 a probable date. Luke says that, when Paul first visited Corinth, he met a Jew named Aquila, 'lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all

---

most suggestive example' of the type of agitator in question. Simon's presence in Rome in the time of Claudius is mentioned by Justin (*Apol.*, i. 26.2). An even more improbable identification of Chrestus than that with Simon Magus—namely, with James the Just—has recently been proposed by B. E. Thiering, *The Gospels and Qumran* (Sydney, 1981), p. 271.

1 That he was indeed there at that time is argued by R. Graves and J. Podro, *Jesus in Rome* (London, 1957).


3 Orosius (writing AD 417–18) quotes Suetonius on the expulsion and says that Josephus dates the incident in AD 49 (*Hist.*, 7.6.15 f.). But there is no reference to the incident in the extant writings of Josephus.

4 The question arises of the relation of the expulsion recorded by Suetonius to an action of Claudius dated by Dio Cassius (*Hist.*, 60.6) to the first year of his principate: 'When the Jews [sc. of Rome] had again multiplied to a point where their numbers made it difficult to expel them from the city without a riot, he did not banish them outright but forbade them to meet in accordance with their ancestral way of life.' If this ban on meetings was later lifted, then perhaps Claudius, 'annoyed that his relaxation ... had led to a repetition of disorder, reacted more severely than before, this time with an expulsion' (E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule* [Leiden, 1976], pp. 215 f.).
the Jews to leave Rome' (Acts 18:2). The reference in Acts 18:12 to Gallio as proconsul of Achaia during Paul's stay in Corinth enables us to date Paul's arrival in that city in the late summer of AD 50; it is therefore quite probable that Priscilla and Aquila left Rome the previous year.¹

Since Paul, in his references to Priscilla and Aquila, never implies that they were converts of his own, the likelihood is that they were Christians before they left Rome—perhaps, as Harnack suggested, foundation-members of the Roman church.²

In Claudius's expulsion of Jews, no distinction would be made between those among them who were Christians and the majority who were not. The expulsion could have gone far to wipe out the Roman church. But perhaps it did not wipe it out altogether. If in AD 49 there were some Gentile Christians in Rome, they would not be affected by the edict of expulsion. By AD 49 Gentile Christianity was firmly rooted in several cities of the eastern Mediterranean, and if in the eastern Mediterranean, why not also in Rome, to which all roads led from the imperial frontiers? We do not know this for certain: what we can say is that by the beginning of AD 57, when Paul sent his letter to the Roman Christians, the majority of them were apparently Gentiles.³

After the expulsion of Jews from Rome, if the course of events may be so reconstructed, the small group or groups of Gentile Christians in the city had to fend for themselves. But they continued to receive accessions of strength in the years that followed. They were probably not organized as a single city church, but existed as a number of separate house-churches, conscious nevertheless of the bond which united them in faith and love. Some of these house-churches, indeed, may have been associated with the imperial establishment. It is at a later date that Paul refers to 'saints . . . of Caesar's household' (Philippians 4:22).⁴

²Cf. A. Harnack, 'Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefes', ZNW, i (1900), 16 ff.
³This is a reasonable inference from Romans 1:13; 11:13.
⁴See Bulletin, lxii (1980–1), 265.
But the evidence of Romans 16:10 f. suggests that there were Christians in some of the groups that made up 'Caesar's household' of slaves and freedman—among the Aristobuliani, for instance, and the Narcissiani.¹

When, around the time that Nero succeeded Claudius in the principate (AD 54), the expulsion edict became a dead letter (like earlier expulsion edicts of the same kind),² Jews began to return to Rome, and Jewish Christians among them. Priscilla and Aquila seem to have returned soon after the end of Paul's Ephesian ministry (AD 55); their residence in Rome served as the headquarters of a house-church (Romans 16:5) as their residence in Ephesus had done (1 Corinthians 16:19). There were no doubt other Jewish house-churches added to the Gentile house-churches already existing. What kind of reception did these returning Jewish Christians meet with from their Gentile brethren?

It is implied in Romans 11:13–24 that the Gentile Christians tended to look down on their Jewish brethren as poor relations. Paul, discussing the place of Jews and Gentiles in the divine purpose, warns his Gentile readers not to give themselves airs: even if they are now in the majority, they should bear in mind that the base of the church—of the Roman church as well as of the church universal—is Jewish.

Caution must be exercised when evidence is sought in this letter for the state of the Roman church at the time of writing, lest we find ourselves arguing in a circle. It is all too easy to draw inferences from the letter about the state of the church, and then use those inferences to help us in understanding the letter.

Here, however, we have a letter from Paul explicitly addressed to the Christians of Rome: 'to all God's beloved in Rome' (Romans 1:7). True, there is one textual tradition which omits the phrase 'in Rome' both here and in verse 15, but this omission cannot be original. The sense requires a place-name, and no other place-name than Rome will fit the context (this is no circular letter in

²E.g. the expulsion under Tiberius in AD 19 (Josephus, Ant. 18. 65. 81 ff.; Tacitus, Ann. 2.85; Suetonius, Tiberius, 36), ascribed by Philo (Leg. 159 ff.) to the malignity of Sejanus.
which a variety of place-names might be inserted in a blank space left for the address). The omission of the reference to Rome can best be explained, as T. W. Manson explained it, by the supposition that Marcion struck it out, after his rejection by the Christian leaders in Rome, to show that in his judgement such a church did not deserve the honour of being addressed in a letter from the only true apostle of Christ.¹

Paul writes to the Roman Christians, he says, because he hopes to pay them a visit soon. He had planned to visit their city on earlier occasions but had not been able to put those plans into action. One of the occasions he has in mind may have been the time when he first set foot in Europe. Having crossed the Aegean to Macedonia in AD 49, he found himself travelling from east to west along the Egnatian Way, evangelizing first Philippi and then Thessalonica. Had nothing interfered with his programme he might have continued his westward journey until he reached one of the Adriatic termini of the Egnatian Way, after which the natural course would have been to cross the Straits of Otranto to Brindisi and proceed along the Appian Way to Rome.² He was prevented from doing this by the riots which broke out in Thessalonica while he was there—impulsore Chresto, it might have been said there also, for he and his colleagues were charged with proclaiming ‘another emperor, namely, Jesus’ (Acts 17:7). Paul was not only forced to leave Thessalonica and proceed no farther along the Egnatian Way; as he turned south he found that there was no place for him anywhere in Macedonia, and he was unable to settle until he reached Corinth, where he stayed for eighteen months.

But even if he had been left in peace to continue along the Egnatian Way, it would have been an inopportune time for him to visit Rome: it was just then that Claudius issued his expulsion edict. A visit to Rome must await a more convenient season, and early in AD 57 the way seemed more propitious for such a visit

¹T. W. Manson, ‘St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans’, 226–9 (Studies, pp. 227–30); see, however, H. Gamble, The Textual History, pp. 29–33, 100 ff.
THE ROMANS DEBATE—CONTINUED

than ever it had been before. The situation had changed: Nero was now on the imperial throne, halfway through his first quinquennium, which was greeted, especially in the eastern provinces, as a kind of golden age.

This, then, is the background to the letter and there is general agreement that Paul sent it to prepare the Roman Christians for his prospective visit. But why, it may be asked, did he send a letter with these particular contents? He mentions his visit only at the beginning and at the end; what is the relevance to the Roman Christians of the main body of the letter?

After his preliminary remarks about his occasion for writing, Paul launches into a sustained and coherent statement of the gospel as he understood it, with special emphasis on the justifying grace of God, available on equal terms to Jews and Gentiles (1:16–8:40). Then comes a careful inquiry into God's purpose in history, with particular reference to the place of Jews and Gentiles in that purpose (9:1–11:36). Various ethical admonitions (12:1–13:14), including a problematic paragraph on the Christian's relation to the state (13:1–7), are then followed by a particular paraenesis on the mutual responsibilities of the 'strong' and the 'weak in faith' within the Christian community (14:1–15:13). Next, Paul makes a short statement about his activity as apostle to the Gentiles thus far (15:14–21), together with an account of his plans for the immediate and subsequent future (15:22–33). The letter comes to an end with the commendation of Phoebe, who is taking it to its destination (16:1 f.), and a series of greetings to twenty-six individuals, who belong to at least five groups or house-churches (16:3–15). Greetings are sent from 'all the churches of Christ', presumably those of the Pauline mission-field (16:16). A final admonition (16:17–20) is followed by greetings from

1 The date AD 57 is indicated by forward (from Gallio) and backward (from Festus) dating. By Pentecost of the year in which Romans was written Paul had arrived in Judaea; not long after his arrival he was detained in custody in Caesarea, and remained there for two years, until Festus became procurator (Acts 24:27). There is numismatic evidence for dating the accession of Festus in AD 59 (cf. F. W. Madden, History of Jewish Coinage [London, 1864], p. 153; A. Reifenberg, Ancient Jewish Coins [Jerusalem, 1947], p. 27; see also E. Schürer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, i [Edinburgh, 1973], p. 465, n. 42).
named individuals among Paul's present companions (16:21–3), and by a benediction (16:24) and doxology (16:25–7) of disputed authenticity.¹

If we knew more about the current situation in the church of Rome, it might be seen that the detailed contents of the letter are more relevant to that situation than can now be established. But it will be rewarding to look at the contents section by section.

As regards his lengthy statement of the gospel (1:16–8:40), it was in any case expedient that Paul should communicate to the Roman Christians an outline of the message which he proclaimed. Misrepresentations of his preaching and his apostolic procedure were current, and must have found their way to Rome. It was plainly undesirable that these should be accepted in default of anything more reliable. Paul does not, for the most part, refute those misrepresentations directly (there are a few incidental allusions to them, as in Romans 3:8, καθώς βλασφημούμεθα) but gives a systematic exposition, showing how, if the contemporary plight of mankind, Gentile and Jewish, is to be cured, God’s justifying grace, without discrimination among its beneficiaries, is alone competent to cure it.

This exposition is carried on largely in terms of a debate or dialogue with the synagogue. Paul must have engaged in this kind of exchange repeatedly in the course of his preaching—what, for example, were the terms in which some members of the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch ‘contradicted what was spoken by Paul’ (Acts 13:45)?—but it was probably relevant to the state of affairs in Rome. The rioting which attended the introduction of Christianity into the Jewish community of the capital some years previously was sparked off by arguments not dissimilar, perhaps, to those voiced in the Jerusalem synagogue where Stephen’s teaching was first heard.² Paul’s exposition of the new faith had different emphases from Stephen’s, but was sufficiently like it to provoke the same kind of violent reaction, as indeed it did from one city to another.

Paul’s gospel, we know, was charged with promoting moral


²Acts 6:9 f.; see p. 338 above.
The Romans Debate—continued

indifferentism, if not with actively encouraging sin, and the form of his argument in this letter implies his awareness that this charge was not unknown in Rome: 'Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?' (Romans 6:1). He makes it plain, therefore, that the gospel which he preaches is not only the way of righteousness, in the sense of the righteous status which God by his grace bestows on believers in Christ, but also the way of holiness, in which 'the righteous requirements of the law are fulfilled in us who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit' (Romans 8:4).

The relation of chapters 9–11 to the plan of the letter as a whole has been much debated. It has been said that, if Paul had moved from the end of chapter 8, with its celebration of the glory which consummates God's saving work in his people, to the beginning of chapter 12, with its practical application of that saving work to the daily life of Christians, we should have been conscious of no hiatus. Yet Paul judged it fitting to grapple at this point with a problem which, as he confesses, caused him great personal pain.

Israel, the nation which God had chosen to be the vehicle of his purpose of grace in the world, had as a whole failed to respond to the fulfilment of that purpose in Jesus Christ. Paul was conscious of this as a problem for himself both on the personal and on the apostolic level. If in Israel's failure to respond he saw writ large his own earlier unbelief, that very fact brought hope with it: as his eyes had been opened, so his people's eyes would surely be opened. For this he prayed incessantly.1 Indeed, if Israel's salvation could be won at the price of his own damnation, he would readily pay that price.2 He would gladly have devoted his life and strength to the evangelizing of his people,3 but he was specifically called to be Christ's apostle to the Gentile world. Yet he trusted that even by the evangelization of Gentiles he would indirectly do something for the advantage of his own people: they would be stimulated to jealousy as they saw increasing numbers of Gentiles enjoying the gospel blessings which were the fruit of God's promises to the patriarchs, and would waken up to the

---

1 Romans 10:1. 
2 Romans 9:1–3. 
realization that these blessings were for them too—that in fact they should properly have been for them first, since they were the descendants of the patriarchs and the inheritors of those promises. This prospect enhanced the prestige of his apostleship as he contemplated it: ‘inasmuch as I am the Gentiles’ apostle, I glorify my ministry in order to make my kinsfolk jealous and thus save some of them’ (Romans 11:13 f.).

But it is not simply to share with the Roman Christians his concern for Israel and his appreciation of the significance of his apostleship that he writes like this. His theme is relevant to the situation in Rome. It is in this context that he warns the Gentiles among his readers not to despise the Jews, whether the Jews in general or Jewish Christians in particular, because God has not written them off. They continue to have a place in his purpose, and his purpose will not be completed until, with the ingathering of the full tale of Gentile converts, ‘all Israel will be saved’ (Romans 11:25 f.). Gentile Christians must not pride themselves on the superiority of their faith, but remember that they are what they are only by the kindness of God. This will induce in them a proper sense of humility, and respect and understanding for their fellow-believers of Jewish stock.

The paragraph about the Christian’s relation to the secular authorities (Romans 13:1–7) is best understood in the light of the Roman destination of the letter. This is not a universal statement of political principle. The injunction to ‘render (ἀπόδοτε) to all their dues’ (13:7) may indeed be viewed as a generalization of Jesus’ precept: ‘render (ἀπόδοτε) to Caesar what belongs to Caesar’ (Mark 12:17). That precept was addressed to a particular situation in Judaea, in face of a firmly held and violently defended doctrine that for Jews of Judaea to pay tribute to a pagan overlord was to take from God the things that were his and hand them over to another. That situation, of course, did not exist in Rome. But in generalizing the dominical precept Paul has in mind the situation which did exist in Rome and in other cities throughout the empire.

Eight years previously, it appears, the introduction of Christianity into Rome had led to riots. About the same time, according to Luke, the arrival of Paul and his fellow-preachers in
Thessalonica provoked the charge that they were the men who had subverted the whole world and kept on ‘acting against the decrees of Caesar’ (Acts 17:6 f.). The name of ‘Christian’ had subversive associations in Rome and elsewhere: some at least remembered that the founder of the movement had been executed by sentence of a Roman judge on a charge of sedition.\(^1\) It was most important that Christians in the imperial capital should recognize their responsibility not to give any support by their way of life to this widespread imputation of disloyalty, but rather refute it by punctilious obedience to the authorities and payment of all lawful dues. Thus far the representatives of imperial law had, in Paul’s experience, shown at least a benevolent neutrality to the prosecution of his mission.\(^2\) The time was to come, and that in Rome itself, when this would no longer be so. When Caesar demanded the allegiance which belonged to God, his demand had to be refused. But Caesar had not yet done so, and Paul does not mention this eventuality. His approach to the matter is relevant to the situation of Roman Christians at the time and in the circumstances of their receiving the letter.

Equally relevant to the Roman situation is the practical section in Romans 14:1–15:7 in which Paul deals with the relation between the ‘strong’ and the ‘weak’ in the Christian fellowship—the ‘weak’ being those who scrupulously abstained from certain kinds of food and paid religious respect to certain holy days, while the ‘strong’ (like Paul himself) had a more robust conscience with regard to such externalities.

There is a degree of resemblance between what Paul says here and what he says to the Corinthian church on the issue of eating or avoiding the flesh of animals offered in sacrifice to a pagan deity (1 Corinthians 8:1–13; 10:14–30). But in this section of the letter to the Romans there is no direct word about eating ἔδωκολόθυτα (an issue bound to be acute in a mainly Gentile church like that of Corinth). The distinction here is rather between the believer who can, with a good conscience, eat food of any

\(^1\) Cf. the only mention of the trial of Jesus by a pagan author: ‘Christus Tiberio imperitante per procuratorem Pontium Pilatum supplicio adfectus erat’ (Tacitus, Ann. 15.44.4).

\(^2\) Notably Gallio, who refused to take up a complaint against him at Corinth (Acts 18:12–16).
kind and treat all days alike, and the believer whose conscience forbids the eating of any but vegetable food and the doing of ordinary work (however normally legitimate) on a holy day. The principle of mutual considerateness which Paul inculcates in this section would, of course, cover the issue of εἰδωλολατρία, but if Paul has one particular situation in mind here, it is a situation in which Jewish and Gentile Christians have to live together in fellowship. It was to such a situation, indeed, that the Jerusalem decree was addressed a few years before, but Paul takes a different line from the decree. The decree urged abstention from εἰδωλολατρία and flesh from which the blood had not been completely drained; Paul urges his readers to consider one another.

It was not simply that Jewish Christians continued to confine themselves to kosher food and to observe the sabbath and other holy days, while Gentile Christians practised complete liberty in both respects. The situation was probably more complex. Many Jewish Christians had become more or less emancipated from legal obligations in religion, even if few were so totally emancipated as Paul was. On the other hand, some Gentiles were more than willing to judaize, to take over the Jewish food restrictions and Jewish regard for holy days, even if they stopped short at circumcision. We have examples of this tendency to judaize in our own day, even if it is not expressly called judaizing; and in the apostolic age we have only to think of Paul's Gentile converts in Galatia, who were not only beginning to keep the Jewish sacred calendar but even to accept circumcision.

Among the house-churches of Rome, then, we should probably envisage a broad and continuous spectrum of varieties in thought and practice between the firm Jewish retention of the ancestral customs and Gentile remoteness from these customs, with some Jewish Christians, indeed, found on the liberal side of the halfway mark between the two extremes and some Gentile Christians on the 'legalist' side. Variety of this kind can very easily promote a

---

3 The varieties need not be demarcated so distinctly as in P. S. Minear, The Obedience of Faith (London, 1971), pp. 8 ff., where five different outlooks are identified.
spirit of division, and Paul wished to safeguard the Roman Christians against this, encouraging them rather to regard the variety as an occasion for charity, forbearance and understanding.

Instead of laying down rules which would restrict Christian freedom, Paul makes it plain that, religiously speaking, one kind of food is no worse than another, one day no better than another. It is human beings that matter, not food or the calendar. Christian charity, on the one hand, will impose no limitations on another’s freedom; Christian charity, on the other hand, will not force liberty on the conscience of someone who is not yet ready for it. The scrupulous Christian must not criticize his more emancipated brother or sister; the emancipated must not look down on the over-scrupulous. The only limitation that can properly be imposed on Christian liberty is that imposed by Christian charity, and it can only be self-imposed. No Christian was more thoroughly emancipated than Paul, but none was readier to limit his own liberty in the interests of his fellow-Christians.\(^1\) In such matters as abstention from food or observance of days he conformed to the company in which he found himself: in themselves they were matters of utter indifference.\(^2\) This example he recommends to others. For the rest, they should do what they believe to be right without forcing their convictions on others or thinking the worse of others if they do not see eye to eye with them.

2. Spain

If Spain plays a less crucial role in the letter than either Rome or Jerusalem does, it is no merely peripheral one. Not only did Paul’s plan to visit Spain provide him with an opportunity to gratify his long-cherished desire to see Rome, but it enabled him to invite the Roman Christians’ collaboration in the next phase of his apostolic enterprise. It meant, moreover, that he could tell the Roman Christians of his plan to visit them without giving them cause to suspect that he was coming to put down his roots among them or assert apostolic authority over them. At the same time, by assuring them of his ardent longing to make their

\(^1\) Cf. 1 Corinthians 8:13; 10:33; Romans 14:14.  
\(^2\) Cf. 1 Corinthians 9:19–23.
acquaintance he makes it plain that he does not simply see in
their city a convenient stopping-off place on his way to Spain.
Rome probably lay no less close to his heart at this time than
Spain did.¹

But why should he think of evangelizing Spain? If he judged his
task in the Aegean world to be complete and wished to adhere to
his policy of confining his ministry to virgin soil, his range of choice
in the Mediterranean world, as has been said, was limited. By AD
57 the gospel had certainly been carried to Alexandria and
Cyrene, if not farther west along the African coast. The close
association between proconsular Asia and Gallia Narbonensis
would suggest that the evangelization of the former territory in
AD 52-5 led quickly to the evangelization of the latter. But Spain,
for long the chief bastion of Roman power in the west, beckoned
Paul as his next mission-field.

We have no idea what contact, if any, Paul may have had with
people from Spain who could have told him something of
conditions in that land.² One thing is certain: the language which
had served him so well in his ministry hitherto, and served him
equally well in his present communication with Rome, would not
be adequate for the evangelizing of Spain. Spain was a Latin-
speaking area. Paul was probably not entirely ignorant of Latin,
but he would require to speak it fluently if he was to do effective
work in Spain. It was perhaps in order to spend some time in a
Latin-speaking environment that he had recently paid a visit to
Illyricum. We should not, in fact, have known about his visit to
Illyricum but for his mentioning it in Romans 15:19 as the
westernmost limit of his apostolic activity thus far.

If Illyricum provided him with some linguistic preparation, there
were other kinds of preparation required for such an enterprise as
he contemplated in Spain. In earlier days the church of Syrian
Antioch had provided Paul and Barnabas with a base for the
evangelization of Cyprus and South Galatia. Later, when
Christianity had been established in Corinth and Ephesus, these
¹Chrysostom goes farther: ‘he mentions Spain in order to show his eagerness
and warmth towards them [the Roman Christians]’ (Homilies on Romans, 30 [on
15:28]).
²Cf. W. P. Bowers, ‘Jewish Communities in Spain in the Time of Paul the
two cities provided Paul with bases for the evangelization respectively of the provinces of Achaia and Asia. But where would he find a base for the evangelization of Spain if not in Rome? He does not in so many words ask the Roman Christians to provide him with such a base, but he sets the situation before them in such a way that they would see his need of one and could, if they were so minded, spontaneously offer to supply what was needed. 'I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain', he says, 'and to be sped on my journey there by you (ὅπως ὑμῖν προπεμφθῆναι ἐκείν), when first I have enjoyed your company for a little' (Romans 15:24). Here certainly is one facet of his purpose in writing—not, of course, the only one. What the sequel was—whether or not he did go to Spain, and whether or not the Roman church did provide him with a base—is quite unclear, and is in any case irrelevant to our investigation of the purpose of the letter.

3. Jerusalem

Towards the end of his personal remarks in Romans 15, Paul tells the Roman Christians that, before he can come to their city and spend some time with them on his way to Spain, he must for the present go to Jerusalem ‘with aid for the saints’ (Romans 15:25). This is a reference to his involvement in the Jerusalem relief fund, which we know from his Corinthian correspondence to have been very much on his mind for some time back.¹

One obvious reason for mentioning the relief fund to the Roman Christians was to explain why he could not set out for Rome immediately: this business of delivering the collected money to Jerusalem must be completed first. Therefore he could not give them even an approximate date for his arrival in Rome—as things turned out, it was just as well that he did not try to give them one! Even if nothing untoward happened, there was no way of knowing how long the business would take. According to Luke’s record, he hoped to be in Jerusalem in time for Pentecost (which in AD 57 fell on May 29).

But evidently Paul is not merely advising his friends in Rome that there may be some delay in his setting out to see them: he tries, tactfully, to involve them in his Jerusalem enterprise. He does

¹Cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:1–9:15.
not, either expressly or by implication, invite them to contribute to the fund. It had been raised among the churches of Paul's own planting, in which the Roman church had no place. Indeed, just because the Roman Christians were not involved in the fund in this sense, Paul could tell them about it in a more relaxed manner than was possible in writing to people whom he wished to make a generous contribution. The Gentile churches, he says, are debtors to Jerusalem in respect of spiritual blessings; it is but fitting that they should acknowledge that debt by imparting to Jerusalem such blessings as they could impart—material blessings, monetary gifts.

It is plain from his Galatian and Corinthian letters that Paul was greatly concerned to preserve his churches' independence of Jerusalem. Yet here he himself acknowledges their dependence on Jerusalem for the gospel itself. Indeed, we learn more here than anywhere else of Paul's real attitude to Jerusalem. Throughout his letters there is an ambivalence in his relation to the Jerusalem church and its leaders: on the one hand, they must not be allowed to dictate to his churches or himself; on the other, he must at all costs prevent his apostolic ministry and the Gentile mission from having the ties of fellowship with Jerusalem severed. This appears clearly enough in Galatians: in the very context in which he asserts his independence of Jerusalem he tells how he went up to Jerusalem on one occasion and laid his gospel before the leaders of the church there. Happily, they appear to have recognized the validity of Paul's gospel and his authority to communicate it to the Gentiles. What if they had withheld such recognition? Paul was under orders higher than theirs, but his work would be largely frustrated if he had to carry it on in isolation from Jerusalem. Luke does not always tell his readers why Paul's apostolic ministry was punctuated by the successive visits to Jerusalem which he records (Acts 9:26; 11:30; 15:2; 18:22; 19:21), but in the light of Paul's letters we can see why he was so careful to maintain contact with Jerusalem and we can accept Luke's account in this regard as being true to the facts.

The place which Jerusalem occupied in Paul's thinking is emphasized by his statement in Romans 15:19 about the range of

1Galatians 2:2–10.
his apostolic activity to the time of writing: ‘from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.’ It is evident from Acts and from Paul’s own testimony that it was not in Jerusalem that he first preached the gospel. Why then does he give Jerusalem pride of place in this statement? Perhaps because Jerusalem is the place where, by divine decree, the preaching of the gospel is initiated:

out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:3).

This primacy of Jerusalem is recognized in the Lucan tradition—for example, in the direction ‘beginning from Jerusalem’ in the risen Lord’s charge to his disciples (Luke 24:47; cf. Acts 1:8). Paul appears to acknowledge this primacy not only in Romans 15:19 but elsewhere in his letters. He had, in fact, a greater regard for the Jerusalem church and its leaders than they evidently had for him, and was indeed, as the late Arnold Ehrhardt put it, ‘one of the greatest assets for the Jerusalem church’ because, either by his personal action or under his influence, versions of the gospel which were defective by the standards of Jerusalem were brought into conformity with the line maintained in common by Paul and the leaders of the mother-church.¹ And it is a matter of plain history as well as a ‘theological presupposition’ that, from the inception of the church until at least AD 60, ‘Christendom’ (in the words of Henry Chadwick) ‘has a geographical centre and this is Jerusalem. Gentile Christians might be free from Judaism; they remained debtors to Zion.’²

Jerusalem also played a central part in Paul’s understanding of the consummation of God’s purpose in the world. He himself, as apostle to the Gentiles, had a key place in that purpose as he understood it—not only directly, as the progress of the gospel prospered under his hand among the Gentiles, but also indirectly, when (as he hoped) the large-scale participation of Gentiles in the blessings of the gospel would stimulate the Jewish people to jealousy and move them to claim their own proper share in those

blessings. This development would mark the climax of gospel witness in the world and precipitate the parousia. This seems to be the point of Paul's quotation of Isaiah 59:20 f. in this context (Romans 11:26 f.). He quotes it in the form: 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob.' The Hebrew text says 'to Zion'; the Septuagint version says 'for Zion's sake'. Paul has apparently derived 'from Zion' from Psalm 14:7//53:6, 'O that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion!' The implication is that the climax of salvation is closely associated with Jerusalem. Not only did the gospel first go out into all the world from Jerusalem; Jerusalem (if we interpret Paul aright) would be the scene of its consummation. And Paul's own ministry, as he saw it, had a crucial role in speeding this consummation.¹

No wonder, then, that Paul related his ministry closely to Jerusalem. This adds a further dimension of meaning to Paul's organizing of the Jerusalem relief fund and to his resolve to be personally present in Jerusalem with the messengers of the Gentile churches who were to hand it over. It was not only his response to the request of the Jerusalem leaders at an earlier date that he should 'remember the poor' (Galatians 2:10); it was not only an acknowledgment on the part of the Gentile churches of their indebtedness to Jerusalem and a means of promoting a more binding fellowship of love between them and the church of Jerusalem. It was all that, but it was at the same time the outward and visible sign of Paul's achievement thus far, the occasion of his rendering to the Lord who commissioned him an account of his discharge of that commission. It was also, in his eyes, a fulfilment of prophecy.

One of the prophets of Israel had foreseen the day when 'the wealth of nations' would come to Jerusalem, when foreigners would 'bring gold and frankincense and proclaim the praise of the LORD'. 'They shall come up with acceptance on my altar', said the God of Israel, 'and I will glorify my glorious name' (Isaiah 60:5–7). A careful study of Romans 15 leads to the conclusion that Paul sees this promise being fulfilled in the impending visit of Gentile

believers to Jerusalem, carrying their churches' gifts and prepared to join their fellow-believers of Jerusalem in thanksgiving to God. It was this vision that prompted his earnest prayer that 'the offering of the Gentiles (προσφορά τῶν ἐθνῶν) might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:16). This language echoes that of Isaiah 66:20, where the brethren of the Jerusalemites will be brought 'from all the nations as an offering to the LORD'. In the Old Testament context the 'brethren' in question are Jews of the dispersion; for Paul they are fellow-members of that extended family which embraces believing Gentiles and believing Jews—together children of Abraham.

The Gentile Christians brought their monetary offering, but they themselves constituted Paul's living offering, the fruit of his own ἔργον. Paul would not have thought of presenting this offering anywhere other than in Jerusalem. Hence his decision to accompany the Gentile delegates as they travelled there to hand over their churches' gifts to the mother-church. He may have had it in mind to render an account of his stewardship thus far and to re-dedicate himself for the next phase of his ministry in those very temple precincts where, more than twenty years before, the Lord had appeared to him and confirmed his commission to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17–21). His Gentile companions could not accompany him into the temple, but there in spirit he could discharge his ἔργον and present as a 'pure offering' the faith of his converts through which the name of the God of Israel was now 'great among the Gentiles' (Malachi 1:11).

He may indeed have hoped that on a later occasion, when his contemplated evangelization of Spain was completed, he might pay a further visit to Jerusalem with a fresh offering of Gentiles from 'the limit of the west' and render a further, perhaps the final, account of his stewardship.

---

1 See p. 345 above, with n. 3.
2 Cf. 1 Clement 5:7 (τὸ τέρμα τῆς δύσας).
3 For the argument that the 'full number of the Gentiles' (Romans 11:25) will not 'come in' until Paul 'has brought Christian representatives from Spain to Jerusalem as part of his collection enterprise' see R. D. Aus, 'Paul's Travel Plans to Spain and the "Full Number of the Gentiles" of Rom. xi.25', NovT, xxi (1979), 232–62.
But at the moment his visit to Jerusalem with the fruit of his Aegean ministry had to be paid, and he could not foresee how it would turn out. He lets his Roman readers fully into his motives for paying the visit, and shares with them his misgivings about the outcome. That the ‘unbelievers in Judaea’ would stir up trouble for him as on previous occasions was only to be expected; but would the gift-bearing Creeks (Danaos et dona ferentes) be ‘acceptable to the saints’ (Romans 15:31)? Paul could not feel sure on this score, and he invites the Roman Christians to join him in earnest prayer that his hopes and plans would be fulfilled. If things turned out otherwise, then all the care which had gone into the organization of the fund, all the high hopes which Paul cherished for the forging of a firmer bond of affection between the mother-church and the Gentile mission, would be frustrated. Whether or not the leaders of the Jerusalem church did in fact accept the gifts in the spirit in which they were brought is disputed, but it does not affect our understanding of Romans. One thing is clear: Paul was anxious that they should so accept them, and he seeks the prayers of the Roman Christians to this end.

Did he seek more than their prayers? Their prayers were all that he explicitly asked for, but did he hope that they would read between the lines and do even more than he asked?

We may certainly dismiss the view that the letter is addressed only ostensibly to Rome but is essentially directed to the Jerusalem church—that Paul throughout the letter really develops the argument which he hoped would be effective in Jerusalem. There is nothing in the letter to suggest that its contents are not primarily intended for Roman consumption; we have argued indeed that its contents are as a whole suited to the Roman

---

1 Virgil, Aeneid 2.49.
2 J. D. G. Dunn thinks it most likely that ‘the Jerusalem church refused to accept the collection’ (Unity and Diversity in the New Testament [London, 1977], p. 257). (For my part, I think it more likely that they did accept it.)
3 Amplifying the suggestion of E. Fuchs that the ‘secret address’ of the letter is Jerusalem (Hermeneutik [Bad Canstatt, 1963], p. 191), J. Jerrell argues that ‘the essential and primary content of Romans (1:18–11:36) is a reflection upon its major content, the “collection speech”, or more precisely, the defense which Paul plans to give before the church in Jerusalem’ (The Letter to Jerusalem [1972], in The Romans Debate (ed. K. P. Donfried), p. 64).
situation, as they are for the most part unsuited to the Jerusalem situation.

But might Paul be hinting that the Roman Christians could do something to pave the way for a favourable reception in Jerusalem?¹ We have no direct information on such contact as may have existed at this date between the Christians of Rome and the church of Jerusalem, but it would be surprising if there were no communication between them. There would, however, be no time for the Roman Christians to get in touch with Jerusalem between their receiving this letter and Paul's arrival in Jerusalem. Paul was evidently on the point of setting out for Jerusalem when he sent the letter (πορεύομαι, 'I am on my way', he says in Romans 15:25). If the year was AD 57, he left Philippi about 15 April—'after the days of Unleavened Bread' (Acts 20:6)—and reached Caesarea with his companions about 14 May. Even if Phoebe left Cenchreae a month before Paul set out for Jerusalem (mid-March was the earliest date for the resumption of sailing after winter),² she would not have reached Rome much earlier than mid-April, and there was no way that messengers from Rome could reach Judaea before Paul did, even if they had set out as soon as the letter was received.³

But Paul certainly did wish to involve the Roman Christians as closely as possible with his Jerusalem enterprise, and if the Jerusalem leaders could be given to understand (tactfully) that Rome was being kept in the picture, this might have influenced their reception of Paul and his Gentile friends.


²Vegetius, De re militari 4.39. Even a journey by land could not have begun much earlier.

³It would not have made much difference to the timing if Phoebe went to Rome by the Via Egnatia rather than all the way by sea. The promptest journey from Rome to Judaea took nearly five weeks; for example, news of the death of Tiberius on 16 March AD 37 (Tacitus, Ann. 6.50), reached Jerusalem on the eve of Passover (Josephus, Ant. 18.122–4), which in that year coincided with the full moon of April 17 or 18. Cf. A. M. Ramsay, 'The Speed of the Roman Imperial Post', JRS, xv (1925), 60–74.
III. CONCLUSION

In short, not only in his impending visit to Jerusalem to discharge the relief fund and not only in his subsequent Spanish project, but in all the aspects of his apostleship Paul was eager to involve the Roman Christians as his partners, and to involve them as a united body. He did not know how much longer time he had to devote to the evangelization of the Gentile world. He may have believed himself to be immortal till his work was done (he never explicitly says so), but for one so constantly exposed to the risk of death it would have been irresponsible to make no provision against the time when death or some other hazard would prevent him from continuing his work. He had his younger associates, we know—men like Timothy and Titus—who could bear the torch after his departure. But if he could associate with his world vision a whole community like the Roman church, the unfinished task might be accomplished the sooner. The influence of that church sprang not only from the centrality of the imperial capital and its unrivalled means of communication with distant regions, but even more (he had reason to believe) from the outstanding faith and spiritual maturity of which the Roman Christians gave evidence. An individual might suffer death or imprisonment, but a church would go on living. Therefore in all the parts of his letter to the Romans he instructs them, he exhorts them, he shares with them his own concerns and ambitions in the hope that they may make these their own. These hopes and ambitions embraced not only the advance of the Gentile mission but also the ingathering of Israel which, he was persuaded, would follow the completion of the Gentile mission. Because of its history and composition, the church of Rome was uniquely fitted for this ministry. That its members might see the vision and respond to it Paul sent them this letter.

Did the Roman Christians rise to the occasion? The witness of history is that they did. From now on, and especially after AD 70, Christendom, which could hitherto be represented by a circle with its centre at Jerusalem, became rather (in Henry Chadwick's figure) an ellipse with two foci—Jerusalem and Rome.¹ The

¹'The Circle and the Ellipse', p. 29.
influential part played henceforth by the Christians of Rome in the life of the ecumenical church is due not so much to their city's imperial status as to the encouragement given them by Paul in this letter. ²

1 And later, no doubt, during his two years' residence among them. This much may be said with confidence, even if we do not go so far as to say with Henry Chadwick that, 'if there is one man who more than any other man may be regarded as founder of the papacy, that man is surely St. Paul' ('The Circle and the Ellipse', p. 36).