

Romans

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Romans – Introduction: Part 1

Paul's Letters

- After the gospels, there is little more interesting or more difficult to grasp, as the letters of Paul. It has been said that a letter allows one to see into the soul of the writer and that is certainly true of Paul's letters. But at the same time, there is hardly anything more difficult to grasp than Paul's letters. When we read a letter not specifically addressed to us, it is like hearing just one side of a phone conversation. In his letters, Paul is addressing specific issues, answering specific questions, and writing to specific people. We only hear (read) one side of the conversation because we do not have the letters that Paul is responding to. We do not fully understand the circumstances that he was seeking to address. The best we can do is draw inferences and try to reconstruct what the other side of the conversation must have been.
- One of the things which helps us is that in the ancient world of the first century, almost every letter and every document was written on papyrus paper. Papyrus, scholars tell us, "was composed of strips of the pith of a certain bulrush that grew on the banks of the Nile. These strips were laid one on top of the other to form a substance very like brown paper." One of the unique qualities of papyrus is that as long as it stays dry it will virtually last forever, although after 2000 years it does become very brittle. So archeologists sifting through the dry sands of north Africa from Egypt to Morocco and east through Israel and Syria have uncovered "hundreds of documents, marriage contracts, legal agreements, government forms, and, most interesting of all, private letters" and bits and pieces of thousands more. As you read these letters you find that there is certain pattern that they all follow. William Barclay, the Scottish theologian, had once such letter. It is from a soldier, called Apion, to his father Epimachus. He is writing from Misenum to tell his father that he has arrived safely after a stormy passage.

"Apion sends heartiest greetings to his father and lord Epimachus. I pray above all that you are well and fit; and that things are going well with you and my sister and her daughter and

my brother. I thank my Lord Serapis [his god] that he kept me safe when I was in peril on the sea. As soon as I got to Misenum I got my journey money from Caesar--three gold pieces. And things are going fine with me. So I beg you, my dear father, send me a line, first to let me know how you are, and then about my brothers, and thirdly, that I may kiss your hand, because you brought me up well, and because of that I hope, God willing, soon to be promoted. Give Capito my heartiest greetings, and my brothers and Serenilla and my friends. I sent you a little picture of myself painted by Euctemon. My military name is Antonius Maximus. I pray for your good health. Serenus sends good wishes, Agathos Daimon's boy, and Turbo, Gallonius' son."

- Here we see that pattern: the greeting, the prayer, the thanksgiving, special contents which will be the main body of the letter, the salutations and personal greetings. Indeed, Ch. 16, the last chapter of Romans is almost entirely salutations and greetings, but there's some very interesting stuff in there too!

How Paul writes...or doesn't write

- We have this sort of romantic idea of Paul, sitting alone in his jail cell, pen in hand, writing these brilliant letters to his churches. Generally, and especially with Romans, nothing could be further from the truth. So often as we read Romans, Paul starts a thought, goes down this long winding path, but never actually comes back to the original thought. And the real picture we should have of Paul as an author is why this is so. Instead of the lonely Paul, imagine a secretary, in the case of the book of Romans, a fellow named Tertius (16:22), sitting with pen in hand, while Paul is dictating the letter, perhaps pacing up and down, with Timothy and Luke and others nearby perhaps throwing in their two cents worth.
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- When Paul was dictating his letters, he had in his mind's eye a vision of those to whom he was writing. He was pouring out his heart to them in words that fell over each other in his eagerness to help. Paul knew these people, loved these people only wanted the best for these people and often he was passionate, emotional, even broken hearted as he was speaking the words he wanted written to his brothers and sisters in Christ.