

INTRODUCTION 1977: THE NATURE AND SCOPE OF THE ROMANS DEBATE

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The attention which Paul's letter to the Romans is receiving in contemporary biblical scholarship is staggering. Not only is there a plethora of articles, but the number of commentaries and monographs which have been published *since 1970* alone is overwhelming. New commentaries have been written by such prominent scholars as Matthew Black,¹ Charles Cranfield,² Karl Kertelge,³ J. C. O'Neill,⁴ Ernst Käsemann⁵ and Heinrich Schlier;⁶ major new monographs have been authored by Paul Minear,⁷ Walther Schmithals,⁸ and Dieter Zeller.⁹

The inevitable question arises: why such enormous interest with regard to this particular letter of Paul? Up to the time of F. C. Baur,¹⁰ virtually all scholars would have agreed with Melanchthon's evaluation of Romans as a *christianae religionis compendium*. Although Baur was one of the first major scholars to break with such an understanding of Romans as an abstract theological summary, his insights were quickly overlooked and the situation continued virtually unchanged right to the present. Typical of this understanding of Romans as a "compendium of the Christian religion" is the commentary by Anders Nygren,¹¹ published as recently as 1944.

The dominant methodological concern and presupposition of twentieth-century biblical scholarship is the historical-critical method.¹² Among the many contributions of this method is the insight that all New Testament

¹Black, *Romans*.

²Caird, *Romans*.

³Kertelge, *Romans*.

⁴O'Neill, *Romans*.

⁵Käsemann, *Römer*. This commentary is now in its third edition in German and has been translated into English by the Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan [= Käsemann, *Romans*].

⁶Schlier, *Der Römerbrief*.

⁷Minear, *Obedience*.

⁸Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem*.

⁹Zeller, *Juden und Heiden*.

¹⁰Baur, F. C., "Römischen Gemeinde"; idem, *Paulus, der Apostel Jesu Christi* (1845) [ET = *Paul*].

¹¹Nygren, *Romans*; original Swedish edition: *Romarbrevet* (Stockholm; Verbum, 1944).

¹²See further Krentz, *Historical-Critical Method*.

documents were written by the early church for its own needs. In other words, the New Testament texts were written to specific audiences who had concrete concerns and problems. Matthew is different from Mark precisely because the needs of his congregation are different from those of Mark's, and thus the gospel must be actualized and conceptualized in a new way. Similarly, Paul's letter to the Galatians is different from that sent to the Corinthians because the actual situations of the two congregations are different: the Corinthians must be warned against an arrogant individualism and the Galatians against reversion to a Spirit-crippling nomism. Different situations call for different responses.

Another contribution of the historical-critical method is the recognition that parallel materials within the same cultural milieu often can be helpful for the understanding of biblical texts. To know that miracle stories occur not only in canonical literature, but also in rabbinic and Hellenistic literature gives the interpreter comparative materials which allow him or her to see more clearly the nuances and intention of each tradition. To know that Paul's letters have certain points of contact with other Hellenistic and literary letters of the period permits one to perceive more clearly both the similarity and the uniqueness of the Pauline letter corpus. The fact, for example, that most Hellenistic letters have a thanksgiving section whereas Galatians alone among the Pauline letters does not, immediately reinforces one's impression of Paul's frustration with and anger toward the Galatians who are apparently quick to abandon the true gospel which Paul had proclaimed to them.

Until the very recent past, the above mentioned advances and contributions of contemporary biblical scholarship have hardly been applied to Romans; for many it just continued to be a *christianae religionis compendium*. Slowly scholars became restless with this state of affairs, and increasingly they began to raise the matter of Paul's intention in writing Romans. And so the question of the concrete *Sitz im Leben* of Romans emerged more frequently. Also the matter of non-canonical literary parallels and general cultural rhetorical influences began to be discussed more seriously. Thus, one possible answer to the question posed concerning the great contemporary interest in Romans appears to be that only now, as the historical-critical methodology is being focused on Romans with intensity, can significant new ground be broken. Such research, still in its infancy, generates much, and often conflicting, literature. That many of the essays which follow move in different directions and, in fact, give differing answers is a sign that there is a Romans debate in process which is far from complete.

Before turning to the contours of the debate, we might ask an even more preliminary question: why is it important to read about and study such a debate if one is not an erudite scholar? The reason is simple: the implications and challenge of the New Testament for the twentieth century can only be made clear when one knows the setting of each New

Testament book in its original context. In other words, if one does not know the original intention of a document one can hardly interpret its contemporary meaning with accuracy and precision. What emerges in the current debate is exactly this question: Why did Paul write Romans? On the one hand, there is a consensus that in all probability Romans was not intended as a timeless compendium of the Christian faith. This fact alone has obvious implications on how *not* to use Romans in contemporary theology and preaching. On the other hand, a consensus as to its actual purpose is still in process. The following essays illustrate the issues at stake and the direction future interpretations of Romans may take.

The first and oldest (1938) essay included in this collection is that by the great British biblical scholar, *T. W. Manson*. He is particularly concerned by the fact that some manuscripts omit the reference to "Rome" in Rom. 1:7 and 15, and, that some manuscripts circulated which apparently ended at 15:23, others at 15:33, and some with a full sixteen-chapter text. Having Manson's study at the beginning of this handbook has the decided advantage of alerting the reader to the significant text-critical problems which must be confronted in finding any solution to the overall situation dealing with the purpose of Romans.

On the basis of his text-critical examination, Manson breaks with a very common interpretation, viz., that Romans was intended as a letter of self-introduction so that the Roman church would give Paul a friendly reception and speed him on his way to Spain. Rather, according to Manson, Romans is a "summing up," a "manifesto" of Paul's deepest convictions. Further, since he would not be able to visit his friends in Ephesus while journeying to Jerusalem, Paul sent them instead a modified copy of this letter to Rome, making it more general and adding a final section of greeting.

The reader will have to ask at least two questions: (1) whether Manson's text-critical hypotheses are plausible,¹³ and (2) whether he has persuasively demonstrated the reason why Paul was interested in writing a summary of his positions to the Roman church.

G. Bornkamm is both sympathetic to and critical of T. W. Manson's work. He agrees that Romans was written from the perspective of Paul's previous controversies, and this is documented by a sixteen-point illustration from a variety of Pauline texts. He disagrees with Manson's rejection of Romans as a letter of self-introduction and believes it to be inadequate to understand Romans merely as a report and summary of past controversies. According to Bornkamm, the polemics of the past controversies are now lifted to a new level of generality,¹⁴ and the style of argument in Romans is that of the so-called Hellenistic diatribe.¹⁵ Bornkamm's con-

¹³Note especially the criticism of Kümmel, *Introduction*, 314–20.

¹⁴See the further development in Karris' essay in chapter 6 of this volume.

¹⁵See further Donfried's reflections on the use of the term "diatribe" in "False Presuppositions," chapter 8 of this volume.

clusion is this: "This great document, which summarizes and develops the most important themes and thoughts of the Pauline message and theology and which elevates his theology above the moment of definite situations and conflicts into the sphere of the eternally and universally valid, this letter to the Romans is the last will and testament of the Apostle Paul."¹⁶

The student of the New Testament is indebted to Bornkamm for outlining the relationship of the content of Romans to the previous Pauline letters. The reader will wish to consider whether the terms "summary," as well as "last will and testament," are accurate and, particularly, whether the latter phrase gives any new insight as to why Paul wrote this letter to Rome.

G. Klein's review of the many possible interpretations of Romans, including such scholars of previous generations as F. C. Baur and R. A. Lipsius, is especially helpful. Since a purely dogmatic understanding of Romans is not a serious option today, there are, according to Klein, two major contemporary types of interpretations: those which argue that Paul is primarily occupied with his own concerns and those which argue that Paul is primarily occupied with the concerns of the Roman church. For Klein, however, both approaches run into difficulties and therefore leave much to be desired.

Critical for Klein's understanding of Romans is what he refers to as Paul's "non-interference clause," a reference to Rom. 15:20: "thus making it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on another man's foundation. . . ." ¹⁷ Too many scholars, he argues, have not taken Paul seriously at this point. When one does, then there can only be one conclusion: "Paul can consider an apostolic effort in Rome because he does not regard the local Christian community there as having an apostolic foundation."¹⁸

K. P. Donfried's article on Romans 16 takes issue not only with the interpretations of Marxsen and Bornkamm but also specifically with Klein's contention that "Christianity in Rome still needed an apostolic foundation."¹⁹ Whether right or wrong, Donfried's criticism forces the reader to go back to the text of Romans to see whether Klein's position is justified on the basis of it. The positive force of Donfried's argument, at points indebted to the publication of W. Marxsen,²⁰ is to show that Romans 16 makes perfectly good sense as an original part of Romans and that it is not a later addition directed to Ephesus as Marxsen and others have suggested. Particularly helpful is the careful linguistic analysis of the names used by Paul in the greetings of chapter 16.

¹⁶Bornkamm, "Last Will and Testament" (= ch. 2 in this vol.), 27-28.

¹⁷Note Donfried's criticism of this interpretation, Donfried, "Short Note on Romans 16" (= ch. 4 in this vol.), 44-45.

¹⁸Klein, "Paul's Purpose" (= ch. 3 in this vol.), 29-43.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰Marxsen, *Introduction*, esp. 107.

For *J. Jervell*, Romans can be interpreted only in light of Paul's own existential situation, which is his impending trip to Jerusalem; it is out of this context that Romans is written. Paul is seeking the support of the Roman Christians so that he may represent all the Gentile churches, standing behind him unified, when he arrives in Jerusalem. The major issue in Romans is not the concrete needs of the Roman church about which we know virtually nothing, but that of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. This is the problem with which Paul will be confronted when he presents the symbolically rich offering of Gentile Christianity in Jerusalem.

Jervell builds an intriguing case for his hypothesis. In testing his argument the reader will have to probe whether the possibility exists that Jervell has overstated the theological differences between Galatians and Romans and whether Romans 9–11 can bear the interpretive weight which Jervell gives to it. One should note, too, how the final pages of this essay stand in sharp contrast with Klein's position that Rome still stands in need of apostolic confirmation. Further, Jervell's entire presupposition about our lack of knowledge concerning the conditions of the Roman church stand in sharp conflict to the position articulated by Wiefel in article seven of this volume. Hopefully this vigorous diversity of perspective will lead the reader directly to the text of Romans and then to some evaluation concerning the merit of these interpretations.

R. J. Karris' position is similar to that of Jervell in denying that Romans was addressed to an actual situation of the church in Rome. He, too, suggests that it is to be viewed in light of Paul's own life situation. Even chapters 14:1–15:13, which appear addressed to concrete problems, are not; they contain only general Pauline paraenesis. Particularly important for the current discussion is Karris' critique of Paul Minear's monograph, *The Obedience of Faith*,²¹ which argues that Romans is specifically addressed to the church in Rome, a church comprised of several divergent communities. Karris challenges Minear's identification of "the weak" with Jewish Christians and "the strong" with Gentile Christians on the basis of an often overlooked study by Max Rauer, *Die "Schwachen" in Korinth und Rom nach den Paulusbriefen*.²² Since chapter 8 in this book discusses Karris' article and Minear's book in detail, we shall proceed to the study by Wolfgang Wiefel.

Wiefel's is an article of signal importance, and it appears here for the first time in English translation. It challenges all those who say that we know nothing about the actual historical or sociological situation of the earliest Christian community in Rome. After a detailed review of the ancient sources, Wiefel argues that indeed we know a considerable amount

²¹See note 7 above.

²²Rauer, "Schwachen."

about Roman Christianity in the first century.²³ Whether Wiefel's portrayal is accurate or not must be judged by future scholarship. Since for the most part Wiefel's work has remained unknown, we can now at least look forward with expectancy to its further evaluation.

M. Stirewalt's work, too, has remained virtually unknown and it appears in print here for the first time. It is presented as an Appendix [now ch. 10, Ed.] to this volume because it does not deal directly with Romans as do the other essays. Yet Stirewalt's essay has enormous relevance for the study of Romans. By probing the form and function of the Greek letter-essay, he presents us with untold parallel and background material which can give us new insights with regard to the background and style of the letter known to us as Romans. The implications of this important study for Romans are drawn out clearly at the end of chapter 8. Stirewalt's is a rich and creative article; yet Stirewalt himself would be the first to admit that it is tentative and awaits a process of further research and testing in this particular specialized area of Greco-Roman backgrounds.²⁴ Nevertheless, the obvious importance of the material gathered by Stirewalt for the study of Romans and its stimulation for further research should be self-evident.

Donfried's essay, clearly influenced by the work of Wiefel and Stirewalt, and in dialog with Karris, challenges two widely held presuppositions: (1) that Romans is not addressed to the actual situation of the church in Rome, and (2) that chapter 16 is not an original and integral part of Romans. Further, he challenges the imprecise use of the term "diatribe" and also the way that term is used uncritically as a way to discuss the relation of Romans to an actual situation in the church of Rome. In fact, he goes so far as to challenge Bultmann's doctoral dissertation of 1910²⁵ as being, at points, in error and outdated. A call is made for new studies of ancient rhetoric and its implication for the New Testament in general, and Romans, in particular.

W. Wuellner analyzes Paul's use of rhetoric in Romans. Ancient use of rhetoric and contemporary studies of that subject are thoroughly reviewed. While Wuellner makes a contribution to the Donfried-Karris debate on Romans, the reader will have to ask whether it is in the sense intended by Wuellner, viz., the precedence of rhetorical criticism and the virtual elimination of the theological and historical context of Romans. One wonders whether the real key to unlocking Romans lies rather in a combination of these three factors: historical setting, rhetoric of argumentation, and theological content. Wuellner's work is at the cutting edge of scholarship and one looks forward to its further development and refinement.

²³A summary of this information can be found in chapter 8 of this volume.

²⁴See further, Donfried, *Setting of 2 Clement*, 19–48.

²⁵Bultmann, *Diatribes*.

These and other essays concerning the meaning and purpose of Romans are significant, for they show the advance of the historical-critical method in an area which has been hitherto unresolved, and they reveal the issues at stake in the debate. Hopefully as scholars continue their reflections, a greater consensus can be reached. In the meantime both the theologian and preacher need be very cautious in drawing any easy conclusions based on any one thesis concerning its origin. Obviously, Romans will have a very different meaning if it was conceived by Paul as an eternally valid summary of his theological position, or, if he conceived it as a response to an actual, acute problem of the first century, manifesting itself particularly, but not exclusively, in Roman Christianity. Only when one knows the meaning of an early Christian document in its first-century setting can one adequately interpret and proclaim it in the twentieth. It is this fact which encourages us to take seriously the historical-critical method.

Finally, the serious student will want to pursue this topic more thoroughly. One needs to remember that what is presented here is only a representative selection of the current discussion, and that careful attention should be given to the footnotes and the many references to other significant studies in this area. In addition to those referred to in this volume, one should pay especial attention to the well-balanced assessment by Ulrich Wilckens,²⁶ and, of course, the most important resource of all should not be overlooked: the text of Romans!

²⁶Wilckens, "Abfassungszweck und Aufbau," 110-70.