

LESSON 2 at StudyRomans.org

(4) Who wrote Romans?

When it comes to identifying the authors of the New Testament books, we have three situations: authors who are not named, authors who are named but unknown, and authors who are both named and known.

First, we have the situation of the **anonymous** author — authors who are not named.

The book of Hebrews, for example, is an anonymous book. The author is not identified, and there is quite a bit of uncertainty about who he was.

With other anonymous books, there is much less uncertainty as to the author's identity. For example, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are all *technically* anonymous if we assume that the titles of the books were added later, but the church has always known who wrote those books based on both the internal and the external evidence.

Second, we have the situation of the **named** but **unknown** author.

The book of James, for example, is *technically* in this category. That book is most certainly **not** anonymous. In fact, the very first word of the book of James is the name of the author! There is nothing anonymous about the book of James.

But some argue that the book of James was written by someone not named James. They say that someone wanted people to believe that

they were James to give their book credibility. But, of course, no one who believes in the inspiration of the Scriptures could ever make that argument. The very first word in the book of James is the name “James”! If that first word is a lie, then why should we read the words that follow? But that first word is not a lie. **James wrote the book of James!** It is not anonymous.

But which James? That we don’t know with complete certainty, and so James *technically* has a **named** but **unknown** author, although I think the evidence is overwhelming that the author of James was James the brother of Christ. We can’t be 100% that the author of James was the brother of Christ, but I think we can be 99% certain.

Third, we have the situation that we have here in Romans — the situation of a **named** and **known** author. The Apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans, and there are very, very few who have ever argued anything to the contrary.

And, again, only those who doubt the inspiration of the Bible would argue that it was was written by someone not named Paul given that the inspired text gives us that name. But while we can be only 99% that the James in James 1:1 was James the brother of Christ, we can be 100% certain that the Paul in Romans 1:1 was the Apostle Paul. In fact, as one commentary rightly says, “no serious scholar doubts that Paul wrote Romans.”

But what about Tertius, whom we mentioned at the end of class last week? Doesn’t the Bible tell us that Tertius wrote Romans?

Romans 16:22 (ESV) — I Tertius, who wrote this letter, greet you in the Lord.

Yes, the Bible says that Tertius *wrote* Romans, but Tertius “wrote” Romans the same way that my printer “wrote” these notes. They both put the ink on the page, but neither supplied the words on the page.

We will have more to say about Tertius when we get to Romans 16, but for now we can just note that Tertius was an *amanuensis* — which is a Latin term referring to a servant or a slave who performed work by hand, especially by taking dictation.

So, when we ask who *wrote* Romans, we need to ask, not who picked up the quill, but who spoke the words to the one who picked up the quill. And that was the Apostle Paul. Paul was the human author of the book of Romans, although (as we have already said) the words that Paul spoke and the words that Tertius then wrote down were words breathed out by God. God is the source of every word in Romans.

So, if Paul is the human author of Romans, what can we say about him? And, more to the point, what *should* we say about Paul that will help us in our study of Romans.

Well, one thing we will see all throughout this letter to the Romans is an emphasis on **two groups** of Christians — Jewish Christians and Greek or Gentile Christians. We see that emphasis starting with the most well-known verse in the entire letter:

Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

We see two groups — the Jews and the Greeks — and as for whether only one of those two groups is being specifically or primarily addressed in this letter, we will save that question for later. But, for

now, all we need to know is that, to understand why Paul was the **perfect person** to write Romans, we need to understand Paul's relation to those two groups: the Jews and the Gentiles. So let's look at that next.

When the church first began to go out into the whole world to spread the gospel, it was faced with a very difficult problem: the message of Christ was meant for all mankind, but Christianity was cradled in Judaism.

From a human perspective, no message meant for the entire world could have had a more unfortunate cradle. The Jews were involved in a double hatred □ the world hated them and they hated the world.

No nation was ever more bitterly hated than the Jews. Cicero called the Jewish religion a barbarous superstition. Tacitus called the Jewish nation the vilest of people.

And no nation ever hated other nations as the Jews did. While some Jews certainly understood that the Jews were intended by God to be a light to the Gentiles, other Jews said that the Gentiles were created by God only to be fuel for the fires of Hell. And they would not help Gentiles in any way, even refusing to give them directions on the road.

Tacitus wrote that the Jews "alone of all nations refuse all fellowship and intercourse with other nations and suppose all men to be enemies." He also wrote that "they provide for one another with the utmost fidelity and readiness, but their attitude towards all others is the opposite of this."

And, so, the church had a problem. It had a message for all men, but in the eyes of the world it was a Jewish thing, and the Jews were the most bitterly hated and hating people in the ancient world.

What was needed was a man who could form a bridge between the Jewish world and the Greek world — **and God chose Paul to be that bridge.** Why?

Before we answer that question, let's remind ourselves about the great task that God had given to Paul. Paul knew that it was his unique responsibility to be the apostle to the Gentiles.

- God told Ananias in **Acts 9:15** that Paul was his chosen vessel to bear his name before the Gentiles.
- In **Acts 13:47**, Paul said that God had commanded him to be a light to the Gentiles.
- When the Jews of Corinth rejected him, Paul told them in **Acts 18:6** that from then on he would go unto the Gentiles.
- In **Romans 11:13**, Paul will call himself an apostle to the Gentiles.
- In **Galatians 1:16**, Paul said that the very purpose Christ was revealed to him was that he might preach him among the Gentiles.
- In **Ephesians 3:1**, Paul describes himself as a prisoner of Christ for the Gentiles.

Paul knew that he had been tasked with bringing Christianity to the Gentile world, and he was always very much aware of that purpose.

And isn't it interesting that of all the apostles who had spent so much time with Jesus, God chose Paul to perform that crucial task.

But why? What were Paul's qualifications for that task?

First, let's consider the Jewishness of Paul.

In 2 Corinthians 11:22, Paul wrote: "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I." Why did Paul make those three claims — and are those different claims or the same claim? They are different claims.

- When Paul claimed to be a **Hebrew**, he was saying that unlike many Jews who had forgotten their native language in favor of Greek, he still spoke Hebrew. In Philippians 3:5, Paul goes even a step further, calling himself "a Hebrew of Hebrews." When it came to Greek culture, Paul did not blend in or assimilate like so many of his fellow Jews had done.
- When Paul claimed to be an **Israelite**, he was claiming to be a member of that nation that had first received the covenants from God. And he was claiming absolute racial purity, not just from Abraham, but from Jacob. Paul was a part of the chosen people of God.
- When Paul claimed to be of the **seed of Abraham**, he was claiming to be an heir of all the promises to Abraham. And he was not a proselyte to Judaism, but rather Paul had a direct connection back to Abraham himself.

Later in this letter, Paul will make a similar claim.

Romans 11:1 (ESV) — I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.

Why did Paul add that last part — a member of the tribe of Benjamin? Why was that important?

- It was from Benjamin that Saul, the first king of Israel and Paul's namesake, had come. (And it's interesting to compare these two Saul's — both of them thought they were obeying God when, in fact, the opposite was true.)
- Benjamin and Judah were the only two tribes that remained true to King Rehoboam when the kingdom split.
- Benjamin was the only son of Jacob who was born in the land of promise.
- When Israel went to battle, the tribe of Benjamin held the post of honor (Judges 5:14).

And we should remember a verse from Hosea that we studied in an earlier lesson on that book.

Hosea 5:8 (ESV) — Blow the horn in Gibeah, the trumpet in Ramah. Sound the alarm at Beth-aven; **we follow you, O Benjamin!**

There, as we noted, the phrase "We follow you, O Benjamin" had become a slogan, much like "Remember the Alamo!" Saying that you were from the tribe of Benjamin would today be like saying that your family came over on the Mayflower.

And, beyond even all of that, Paul had another credential — Paul was Pharisee, and the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6).

There were never more than about 6,000 Pharisees, and they had all separated themselves from the common tasks of life to make it their one aim in life to keep every smallest detail of the law. Paul was one of the very few who had devoted his entire life to the most rigorous observance of the Law of Moses.

So what does that all tell us about Paul? What it tells us is that Paul was not just an Israelite — **Paul was of the aristocracy of Israel. Paul had every credential and every diploma on the wall!**

But why was that important for the task that God had given him — to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Why was Paul's Jewishness important for a task involving the Gentiles?

Simple — **Paul's impressive background meant that no Jewish critic of Paul could ever criticize Paul's Jewishness.** No critic could ever say that Paul had abandoned Judaism because he did not understand it or because he had not fully experienced it. No critic could ever say such a thing about Paul. Paul knew Judaism inside and out.

Just think about how Paul's ministry would have been different if he had not had that impressive background. Just think about what his critics would have said to him: “Paul, your problem is that you know nothing about Judaism. You are just a tent-maker from Tarsus! We have studied these things, but you have not. We are the experts here, not you! When it comes to the interaction between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, the people should listen to us, not you. What do you know about it?”

But they could never say that. Why not? Because whatever credential or accolade that pulled out, Paul had a better one! Paul was a Jewish aristocrat in every way.

But what could such a Jewish aristocrat possibly know about the **Gentiles**? As it turns out for Paul, the answer is plenty! Why?

First of all, Paul was a citizen of Tarsus □ something of which he was always very proud.

Paul told the military commander in Acts 21:39 that he was a Jew of Tarsus, a citizen of no obscure city. And when Paul addressed the hostile mob in Acts 22:3, the very first thing he told them was that he was a Jew “born in Tarsus in Cilicia.”

Why was Tarsus so special?

Tarsus was special because it had a special history. It had been a city as far back as 860 B.C. when Shalmaneser III of Assyria listed it among his conquests. That Assyrian king is the same one shown on the famous Black Obelisk accepting tribute from King Jehu. (You can see a photo of that obelisk on the Handout for Hosea Lesson 2.)

Five hundred years later Alexander the Great caught a chill while bathing in one of the icy rivers in Tarsus and nearly died.

Three hundred years later, Mark Antony was in Tarsus preparing for war against the Parthians. He suspected at the time that Cleopatra was plotting against him so he summoned her to come to the city, which she did □ sailing on a barge and dressed like the goddess Venus.

Tarsus was in the province of Cilicia and was a great center of trade, with a large protected harbor. It was especially famous for making goats' hair felt used to make tent cloth, and, of course, we recall that Paul was a tent maker.

Tarsus was also a university town. One of Tarsus' greatest exports was its scholars who went to teach in many other universities. The schools of Tarsus rivaled Athens and Alexandria. At one time, the library of Tarsus held 200,000 books, including a huge collection of scientific works.

Tarsus was fortunate to have always chosen the right side in a number of civil wars, which is why Tarsus had been awarded the status of a free city, self-governing and independent by Augustus, the first emperor of Rome.

And so Paul was born in a cosmopolitan center of trade and center of learning that was steeped in history. No better training ground could have been found for a missionary sent out to all the people of the world.

But, although Paul was born in Tarsus, he was brought up and educated in Jerusalem, likely having gone off there to study as a young teenager.

Acts 22:3 (ESV) — I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city, educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God as all of you are this day.

Gamaliel, Paul's teacher, was a leading authority in the Sanhedrin, which was the court that dealt with religious matters. That someone

like Gamaliel accepted Paul (then Saul) as his student tells us a great deal about Paul.

Later, in Acts 5, we see Gamaliel preventing Peter and the apostles from being killed — and it is interesting to wonder whether Gamaliel's student, Paul, was also present during those events. When did Paul first see Peter? Was it in Acts 5, perhaps? And, of course, Gamaliel's statement in Acts 5:39 was certainly true of his most famous pupil at that time.

Acts 5:39 — But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!

In any event, in Paul, we have in Paul a man with an unusual background: he was born in a leading Greek city, but he was educated in Jerusalem.

But Paul had another even more important qualification and something even more unusual for a Jew □ Paul was a Roman citizen. And that was something that was often very helpful to Paul and to his mission:

- In **Acts 16**, after Paul was scourged and his Roman citizenship was discovered, the local magistrates offered a terrified apology.
- In **Acts 22**, Paul's Roman citizenship saved him from an examination under the lash.
- In **Acts 25**, no one could deny Paul's appeal to Caesar. Why not? Because Paul was a Roman citizen (which also turned out to be his ticket to Rome).

No Roman citizen could be bound or scourged. No Roman citizen could be crucified. If a man claimed Roman citizenship, no matter where he was in the world, the might and majesty of Rome was behind him. Paul's Roman citizenship gave him safe conduct to the ends of the earth. Cicero wrote:

How often has this exclamation, "I am a Roman citizen," brought aid and safety even among barbarians in the remotest parts of the earth!

How did Paul receive that citizenship? We don't know for sure, but we do have some clues.

Let's start with this question: why was Paul's family living in Tarsus? No Pharisee would ever live outside the holy land unless there was some compelling reason to do so. What compelling reason caused them to move there?

They may have voluntarily emigrated to Tarsus as part of a Jewish colony. But a more likely reason is that they left Jerusalem when Pompey invaded the city in 63 B.C.

We looked at that event when we studied Daniel. As you recall, when Pompey captured Jerusalem, the temple mount was besieged for three months, the streets of Jerusalem flowed with blood, and the priests were cut down at the altar as they performed their duties. Twelve thousand Jews were killed, and Pompey and his men defiled the temple by entering into the holy of holies.

But how did Paul become a Roman citizen, and is that somehow related to Tarsus?

We know that Roman citizen could be purchased, but we also know that Paul did not become a Roman citizen that way.

Acts 22:27-28 (ESV) — So the tribune came and said to him, “Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?” And he said, “Yes.” The tribune answered, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum.” Paul said, “But I am a citizen by birth.”

In fact, I think we can safely say that no Pharisee would ever have purchased Roman citizenship.

Citizenship could also be granted to someone for their great service to the empire, but, again, that seems very unlikely for a Pharisee.

Sometimes citizenship was given as a mark of favor to an entire population of a city, and that is most likely how Paul received his citizenship.

That may have happened back when Augustus declared Tarsus a free city, but more likely that happened further back in 47 B.C. when Julius Caesar came to Tarsus on his eastern campaign. The citizens of Tarsus were so enthusiastic that they changed the name of their city to *Juliopolis* (although that name didn't last). We know that many citizens of Tarsus received their Roman citizenship at that time.

When we look at those facts, what do we see? What we see is the providence of God! What we see is God moving all the pieces into place. What we see is God planning things involving Paul long before Paul was even born!

I have never preached a sermon or taught a class on the subject of abortion, but if I ever did, I would start by looking at all of the people in the Bible who were in the plans of God long before they were

even born. I would look at the people in the Old Testament who were named by God before they were born. And I would also look at Luke 1:41, where the very first person to recognize Christ was an unborn child!

God was likewise planning for Paul before Paul was born. God needed someone who was both a Jewish aristocrat and a Roman citizen. God needed someone who was as familiar with Greek and Roman culture as he was with his own Jewish culture. For the gospel to spread throughout the world, God needed a unique person, and Paul was that unique person.

Was that an accident? Did God just look down in Acts 9 to see if he could find someone like that? No. Not at all.

No one who has ever studied the Bible could ever believe that was an accident. **There are no accidents when it comes to God's plan of redemption!** It had been prophesied long before that Jesus would bless the entire world — both Jew and Gentile. And what we see here is God planning the fulfillment of that prophecy for the Gentile world long before Paul was ever given that great mission.

And as we study Paul's letter to the Romans, we need to keep all of this background in mind. For example, think about what we just looked at, and then look at what Paul wrote in Romans 9:

Romans 9:3 (ESV) — For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.

Yes, Paul was a Hebrew of the Hebrews, but those most of those Hebrews had rejected Paul and were largely responsible for the turmoil

followed Paul wherever he went. But was Paul bitter toward them? We know that he was not. The verse we just read tells us that Paul was not bitter toward the Jews. Yes, Paul was a missionary to the Gentiles, but Paul never lost his deep abiding love for his own people.

Later we will look at Paul's relation to the church in Rome, but let's first look at the history of two other things: the city of Rome and the church in Rome.

(5) What was the history of the city of Rome?

We can't study Paul's letter to the church in Rome without looking closely at the city of Rome. Why? Because, as with most congregations, the church in Rome consisted of a cross-section of the people who lived in the city where it was located.

We see that today with congregations in the Houston area such as our own. We are a much more diverse group than would be found, for example, in a small-town rural Texas congregation located far from the big city.

So what was Rome like when Romans was written, and how did Rome come to be that way?

The first thing we need to know about Rome is the same thing we just saw about the Apostle Paul — they were both central to God's plan to spread the gospel of Christ, and neither Rome nor Paul got here by accident. With both, we can see the hand of God moving all the pieces into place.

And for those of you who were with us in our study of Daniel, we have already studied the central prophecies about Rome — written over half a millennia before the days of Romans.

In our study of Romans, we will be looking at a snapshot of Rome, but we need to remember that Rome has a much longer history than just that snapshot. And we need to remember that Rome neither rose by accident nor fell by accident. God used Rome for his own purposes — and, as we will see, Paul likewise used Rome to further the mission he had been given by God.

When the letter to Romans was written, the city of Rome had a population of from 800,000 to over a million people, making it one of the largest and perhaps the largest city in the ancient world.

And the city of Rome had an incredibly diverse population, with people from all corners of the Roman Empire, including Europeans, Africans, Asians, Greeks, Jews, and many others.

Roman society was a strict hierarchy with distinct classes:

- The **Patricians** (the aristocracy),
- The **senatorial class** (the wealthy landowners and political elite),
- The **equestrians** (the wealthy business class),
- The **middle class** (the merchants, traders, artisans, and minor officials),
- The **plebeians** (the free-born common people),

- The **freedmen** (the former slaves who had gained their freedom), and
- The **slaves**.

In the city of Rome, those groups would never have mingled together as equals (expect perhaps in the public baths). Instead, there would have been strict boundaries between them that could not be crossed.

But not so in the church. In the church, they were all one in Christ. Keep in mind that it was to people from these strictly separated groups that Paul declared in Romans 3:22 that “there is no distinction!” And, later, in Romans 16, Paul greets both prisoners in verse 7 and the city treasurer in verse 23. And here is how Paul describes the church in Romans:

Romans 12:5 (ESV) — So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

One body in Christ — and members one of another. There is only one word to describe that statement at the time and place it was written: **revolutionary!** There was no other organization in Rome where slaves and prisoners could be one body with patricians and city officials!

Anyone who ever says that the New Testament condones slavery does not know the first thing about the New Testament or about the church. We are one in Christ! Elsewhere Paul would tell the slave-owners that “he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him” (Ephesians 6:9).

I think we often take such verses for granted today because of our own culture in this country, which is based on the notion that all men are created equal. But that was most certainly not true of Rome. No one outside of the church in Rome believed that all men were created equal.

Let's look, for example, at slavery in Rome. How many slaves were in the city of Rome? It is estimated that about one-third of the population were slaves, which would put the number of slaves in the city of Rome at between 250,000 and 400,000.

Roman slaves were the property of their owner, and while many slaves were loved and trusted members of the family, under Roman law a slave was not a person but was a thing.

Slaves had no legal rights at all. They could not legally marry, make contracts, or own property. They had no civic rights, no political rights, and no standing in court. Early Roman law allowed masters virtually unlimited power, even the right to kill their slaves. And because slaves couldn't legally marry, their unions were not protected by law. Their children belonged to their master.

So, with that background on the table, let's read once again what Paul will tell us in this letter about the Lord's church:

Romans 12:5 (ESV) — So we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

One body in Christ? Members one of another? Again, the word is **revolutionary!** And particularly so given that the Christ mentioned in that statement had been crucified by Rome as a criminal in a distant province.

Romans 12:5 is a perfect example of why we must know the context of this letter to properly understand this letter. We read that verse quickly and then move right on to verse 6 — but that is not how a first century Roman would have read that verse.

In short, there was nothing like the church in the city of Rome. And, again, I don't think we always see ourselves that way today. I don't think we always see ourselves as unique and different and distinct — but we are!

The church is and has always been unlike any earthly kingdom or organization. That was certainly true in first century in Rome — but it remains true in 21st century Houston! And if we don't see ourselves that way, then Romans is the book for us!

If we had to pick a United States city to compare with Rome, the most likely choice would be New York city. Like first century Rome, New York sees itself as the ultra-sophisticated center of the world, and, like Rome, New York looks down on all of us who live out in the provinces. And they certainly don't need to hear any suggestions on how they should live from some outsider. What do we have that could possibly be of any interest to them?