

Epistle to the Romans: Lecture 1 Introduction

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Session 1

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Abstract

This lecture introduces the Epistle to the Romans, emphasizing its historical, cultural, and theological contexts under the instruction of Dr. Craig Keener. It explores the literary genre of Paul's letters, demonstrating their sophisticated rhetorical structures and significant financial costs compared to typical ancient papyrus letters. The discussion situates the Roman church within its socio-political background, including first-century Jewish-Gentile tensions, the Claudian expulsion, and Roman xenophobia. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how these historical nuances assist modern readers in separating Paul's transcultural moral principles from specific cultural applications.

OUTLINE

I. Introduction to the Epistle to the Romans

- **A. Historical impact and legacy**
 - 1. Teachings outlived Paul (contrast with 2 Timothy 1:15)
 - 2. Influential commentaries (e.g., Origen)
 - 3. Historical transformations (Martin Luther, John Wesley)
- **B. Nature of the document**
 - 1. Treated as a theological masterpiece
 - 2. Not originally written as a systematic theology, though it has theological implications

II. Literary Genre and Epistolary Characteristics

- **A. Letters vs. Epistles distinction**

- 1. Seneca, Cicero, Pliny wrote ordinary letters and letter essays
- 2. Discovery of papyri led to comparison of Paul's letters with ordinary documents
- **B. Statistical differences between Paul's letters and common papyri**
 - 1. Average papyrus letter: ~87 words (similar to Philemon or 3 John)
 - 2. Cicero's average: ~295 words (maximum ~2,530 words)
 - 3. Seneca's average: ~995 words (maximum ~4,134 words)
 - 4. Paul's average: ~2,495 words
 - 5. Romans (longest letter): ~7,114 words
- **C. Argumentation and Structure**
 - 1. Retains epistolary frame (opening and conclusion)
 - 2. Features complex argumentation typical of speeches and letter essays

III. Logistics and Costs of Ancient Letter Writing

- **A. Scribes and Dictation**
 - 1. Tertius identified as Paul's scribe (Romans 16:22)
 - 2. Dictation of Romans estimated to take over 11 hours
 - 3. Process likely involved at least two drafts
- **B. Financial Commitments**
 - 1. Papyrus and labor costs estimated at 20.68 denarii
 - 2. Equivalent modern U.S. currency value: ~\$2,275

IV. Epistolary Conventions and Christian Adaptations

- **A. The Greeting (Opening)**
 - 1. Traditional Greek greeting: *chairein* (greetings)
 - 2. Paul's adaptation: *charis* (grace) and *eirene* (peace)
 - 3. Combination of Greek and Jewish greetings (*shalom*) in a diaspora context
- **B. Function of Greetings as Blessings**

- 1. Acted as "wish prayers" addressing both the reader and God
- 2. Sourced from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ
- 3. Early indication of shared Christology regarding Jesus's divinity
- **C. Opening Prayer and Thanksgiving (Romans 1:8)**

V. Rhetoric and Philosophical Influences

- **A. Ancient Rhetoric**
 - 1. Dominant discipline of advanced training along with philosophy
 - 2. Pervasive in public assemblies and the marketplace
 - 3. Rhetorical features in Romans: *narratio* (narrative background), *propositio* (thesis statement in Rom 1:16-17), and *probatio* (proofs/scriptural citations)
 - 4. Rhetorical devices used: repetition of sounds/phrases, *reductio ad absurdum* (e.g., Romans 2:17-24)
- **B. Philosophical Background (Tarsus)**
 - 1. Tarsus was a major philosophic and rhetorical center alongside Alexandria and Athens
 - 2. Stoicism as the predominant popular philosophy of the era
 - 3. Paul's familiarity with the language of popular philosophy for contextualization
- **C. Paul's Education**
 - 1. Family probably moved to Jerusalem when he was young
 - 2. Studied under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3)
 - 3. Fluent in Greek; extensive knowledge of the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament)

VI. Historical and Socio-Political Setting of the Roman Church

- **A. Origin and Delivery**
 - 1. Written from Corinth (winter stay in Achaia, Acts 20:2-3)
 - 2. Delivered by Phoebe, a deacon (*diakonos*) of the church at Cenchrea (Romans 16:1)

- **B. Demographic Composition of Rome**

- 1. Population estimated closer to 1 million (largest city of Mediterranean antiquity)
- 2. Living conditions: crowded tenement housing (*insulae*) with rickety upper stories and high fire risk
- 3. Meeting places: house churches meeting in lower floors or tenement hallways

- **C. The Jewish Community in Rome**

- 1. Comprised up to 5% of the population (20,000 to 50,000 people)
- 2. Centered in the trans-Tiberium (Trastevere) district; mostly poor dockworkers
- 3. Fragmented synagogue communities (e.g., "The Olive Tree" synagogue)

- **D. Roman Prejudices and Political Timeline**

- 1. Roman xenophobia toward Sabbaths, circumcision, and dietary laws
- 2. Expulsions under Tiberius and Claudius (Claudius's expulsion in 49 CE)
- 3. Return of Jewish believers after Claudius's death in 54 CE
- 4. Predominantly Gentile church base developed during the five-year Jewish absence
- 5. Nero's massacre of Christians in 64 CE