

# The Theology of the Epistle to the Romans.

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## I. INTRODUCTORY.

THE object of the following papers is to attempt to give an "historical" account of the theology of the Epistle to the Romans.

If we look back on the history of Biblical Interpretation, we shall find that the inheritance of the Renaissance has been the gift of grammatical interpretation; but there is something more than that required, in order to get at the meaning of an ancient author. Our method must be historical. The whole aim of the often strangely perverted criticism of the present century has been to dissociate our minds from the aspects of modern life and thought, and put us in the natural surroundings of the times of the writers of the New Testament. This has, it is true, at times been carried out very inadequately and with decidedly harmful results. At one time the study of the New Testament was in apparently inextricable confusion. But gradually we are coming back to old stand-points. The books of the New Testament to which late dates had been assigned are, with perhaps one or two exceptions, being restored, even by critical theologians, almost to their old position. But although this is happening, we must remember that it is by employing more accurately and with fuller knowledge the methods of historical criticism, and we must not be untrue to that criticism which has won us the victory. When we ask the meaning of St. Paul's Epistles, we must put ourselves in the position of St. Paul himself. And this is especially necessary with the Epistle to the Romans; almost all his technical terms had one meaning to him, and have another to us. They have come to us through the Latin Vulgate, and round them have clustered an immense number of associations brought in by the difference of the Latin translations, and the labour of scholastic and Protestant theologians. We must try to divorce ourselves from these associations, and put ourselves in the position and in the mental framework of St. Paul when he wrote, and attempt to arrive in that way at the correct interpretation of the thought of the Epistle. Before we begin to study any work which has

come down from the past, we have learned by experience that there are a certain number of questions which we are obliged to ask. We must ask by whom it was written; or, if it has come down to us with claims to be the work of any definite person, we must ask whether these claims have any substantial ground; and this is especially important in regard to works connected with the early Church. The number of apocryphal books, the number of books ascribed in MSS. to wrong authors, are so great, that the chances are, on the whole, against the authenticity of any special book. In the vast number of cases of spurious work, we can have no difficulty at all; in a considerable number of cases there is really no doubt as to the genuineness. In some few cases the question is one of extreme difficulty. Now with regard to the Epistle of the Romans there is no reasonable doubt at all. It claims to be written by St. Paul, and that claim is almost unanimously allowed on both internal and external grounds.

But there is another question akin to this on which there is more doubt, the integrity of the Epistle. This has been attacked in two directions; the one represented mainly by the Dutch school of theologians may be mentioned and dismissed without much comment. It asserts that although there was an original letter written to the Romans, or to some church or other, by St. Paul, yet that this Epistle was but the nucleus of the present Epistle, and we have before us, according to one writer, the fifth recension. Now we must not be too ready to dismiss such theories unheard, for this reason, that we know in the case, for example, of the Ignatian letters that books were interpolated; but in the case of the Epistle to the Romans, we may dismiss them for the following reasons:—Firstly, because the book is clearly an argumentative whole, and we are able, if we will take the trouble, to trace a very real continuity of thought throughout the whole. A good commentary on the Epistle is the best refutation of these theories. And secondly, because, as a matter of fact, we can trace the history of the text back to the middle of the second

century, and if there had been so many various recensions, they would have left some trace upon it. It is true that Marcion's edition omitted many passages, but we may now take it as proved that Marcion made his texts, as early writers asserted, by mutilating those which he received, and that they were not early recensions which were interpolated by the orthodox.

These theories, then, may be dismissed, but there are certain difficulties concerning the last two chapters which are on a different footing. For they are based on textual phenomena, and are therefore more strongly supported than merely conjectural suppositions. As they do not, however, directly concern our present purpose, it is only necessary to mention them. It is perhaps convenient to state that the present series of articles is written on the supposition that the Epistle as we have it represents substantially the original letter as it came from the hands of the apostle. This is the view of Dr. Hort, and will, the present writer believes, ultimately be found correct.

We must now go a step further, and put before ourselves the circumstances in which the Epistle was written. Its date is fixed almost certainly. It was written from Corinth towards the end of the year 58 A.D.; it was written directly before the last visit of St. Paul to Jerusalem, at which he was imprisoned. In the series of St. Paul's Epistles, it comes probably immediately after the Epistle to the Galatians and the two Epistles to the Corinthians. This is a question of extreme importance, for it tells us of the problems and the difficulties which were agitating the Christian communities, and must have chiefly occupied St. Paul's mind; and the Epistle was, I believe, written from the point of view suggested by the various difficulties in the writer's own experience rather than from any special knowledge he might have of the Roman Church.

Let us put before ourselves the position of these communities. They had accepted this new religion, which came to them offering hopes and consolations, and a purer and a higher moral ideal; they had accepted the message which had come to them from this strange Jewish race; they had enrolled themselves in this new Christian society; they waited anxiously for the coming of the Lord from heaven; they hoped to share His kingdom hereafter; and now they began to be perplexed, for

they heard different accounts of what they must do to prepare for His coming.

For there were some teachers—and these were Jews—who came with authority, and said, "Was not Jesus a Jew as we? did He not live as we do? and do not His own disciples in Jerusalem act in the same way? You must keep all the Jewish law, you must be circumcised, you must be scrupulous about eating and drinking, you must be very careful about keeping the Sabbath and the feast days and fast days." And to some, as will always be the case, a simple rigid code of rules seemed easy and attractive. But there were others who remembered that St. Paul had taught something very different. Had he not spoken of the gospel of liberty and freedom? Had he not said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved"? Had he not spoken of the merit of Christ's death, and grace and pardon for sins? This was a very different gospel. And many of them, who still clung to their old heathen customs, were impressed with this new idea of liberty. They began to think action and conduct indifferent. They said, "It does not matter what we do." And then, carried away by excitement and emotion, and with their moral system unhinged, as is often liable to happen when men are under the influence of strong religious feeling, they had given way to gross fleshly sins, and had plunged into the abyss of antinomianism.

These were the two parties, and these were the burning questions of the day, although they were mixed up with and complicated by others which we need not here dwell on. And if we read the Epistles written by St. Paul at this time, we shall see how he deals with them. Read the Epistle to the Galatians, and mark the burning indignation with which the apostle attacks those false teachers who had seduced men by imposing on them the yoke of the Jewish law. Note his enthusiasm for Christian freedom. Read the First Epistle to the Corinthians, and learn something of his indignation at the abuse of Christian freedom, and the breach of the moral law. Remember with what strength he asserts the authority of his mission and the truth of his teaching, and you will know something of the circumstances under which this Epistle was written. It was with the sound of this controversy still ringing in his ears that St. Paul wrote the Epistle to the Romans, and treated no longer controversially, but on a broad and massive

basis of thought, the questions which had been then raised.

And now what do we know of the people to whom St. Paul was writing? We are well acquainted with the introductions to modern commentaries, and we know that there has been much discussion based on an examination of the language of the Epistle, as to whether the majority of the church was formed of Jew or Gentile Christians. At one time it was the fashion to consider that it consisted almost entirely of Jewish Christians; now the balance of opinion has gone round, and it is agreed that the Church of Rome was mainly a Gentile body. In opposition to both these theories it is more probable that the main body of the Epistle does not really throw any light on the characteristics of the church to which it was addressed, and for the following reasons:—

1. That the arguments used on either side are singularly inconclusive, being based for the most part on the fact that St. Paul identifies himself with the class in his audience to whom his remarks for the moment apply.

2. That there is considerable evidence to show that the Epistle was so general in its scope that it was felt it might be sent to other churches.

3. That those passages in chaps. xii.—xiv. which have been supposed to have had a special application can be much more easily interpreted if they are taken quite generally. St. Paul is laying down great moral principles and illustrating them by special cases. He is not dealing with the circumstances of the Roman Church.

4. That the letter was suggested by St. Paul's own experiences and by the question which agitated the Church as a whole, and that there is nothing to show that he had any special and official knowledge of the Roman Church, or of its difficulties, as he clearly had, for example, of all the affairs of the church of Corinth.

If, then, the main body of this letter is concerned, not with the definite difficulties of the Roman Church, but with the questions agitating the Church at large, which probably indeed could arise there, what do we know of the Church? From the Acts of the Apostles and the personal portions of this Epistle we can gather a few facts which will be of value.

1. In the first place, Christianity had not been preached there officially. St. Paul had never been there; he implies by his reference to his habit not

“to build on other men's foundations,” that no other leader of the apostolic body had preached there; and when he addresses the Jews in the Acts, it is quite clear that Christianity has not been preached in their synagogue—they knew little about it except by report.

2. Christianity then must have come to Rome because those who had already been converted had drifted there, and whether of Jewish or Gentile origin had already become separated from the synagogue. And if we consider that, does not it throw light at once on the salutations at the end of the Epistle? How does St. Paul come to know so many persons in Rome? Simply because the Roman Christians consisted largely of those whom he had himself come in contact with and converted in other places. The world drifted to Rome then, as it drifts to London now, and this would be particularly the case in that nomad, denationalised class which formed the lower orders in the big commercial towns from whom the largest number of converts in the early days of Christianity seem to have come.

3. And as a result of these two characteristics there was probably no fully organised church in Rome. The list of salutations at the end tells us of the “church which is in their house,” “the brethren that are with them,” “all the saints that are with them”—suggesting that various Christian houses formed a centre for small bodies of believers. If, too, we may trust the incidental reference to Andronicus and Junias as “of note among the apostles,” some of these Christians who had come to Rome were members of that itinerant ministry of apostles and prophets on which so much light has been thrown by the discovery of the “Teaching of the Apostles.” If this description of the Roman Church is right, then we can understand the meaning of the tradition which ascribes its foundation to St. Paul and St. Peter. That it was they who first preached Christianity here is impossible; but that they first founded and built up and organised a church on the spot is neither impossible nor improbable.

To come then to the conclusion of our argument. The Epistle to the Romans does not arise out of the special needs of the community to which it is addressed; it arises out of the circumstances of the Church at large, and St. Paul, impelled by various motives, writes a formal treatise on those parts of the Christian religion which were now under dis-

cussion, to a church already rapidly growing in numbers, already getting its hold on the households of some of the great families of the city, but without as yet having had the benefit of authorised and formal teaching from a member of the apostolic body. To this body he writes, and, as we shall see, gives an account of what he calls "the gospel." This, as we shall find, is not a detailed account of Christianity as a whole. St. Paul assumes a knowledge of its primary facts. He deals with it

rather in so far as it is the "good news" coming to each individual, and in so far as there was doubt or discussion about it. St. Paul deals in fact with the questions of the times, but he does not deal with them in a shallow or unmeaning way. He discourses on them in relation to the broad principles of Christian life, and so he appeals to us as he appeals to them, and with him we are to consider the good news of the Christian message—The Gospel of Christ.

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I. On Zechariah—Dr. Dods' *Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi* (2s. 6d.), or Orelli's *Minor Prophets* (10s. 6d.).

On Acts i.-xii.—Professor Lindsay's *Acts of the Apostles* (vol. i. 1s. 6d.), or Dr. Rawson Lumby's *The Acts* (4s. 6d.). And for the reader of Greek—Mr. Page's *Acts of the Apostles* (2s. 6d.), or Meyer's two volumes on the Acts (21s.).

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