

OUTLINE — DISCUSSION 1

CHRISTIANITY

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Paul of Tarsus was an observant Jew, who was not one of Jesus' followers during the latter's life. He violently opposed the early Christians, participating in efforts to suppress them. He experienced a conversion and became as ardent a Christian as he had earlier been an opponent of Christianity. He felt that he was called to a special mission to be the apostle of the Gentiles, to convert non-Jews to Christianity. He went on three missionary journeys, preaching and founding churches in Greece and Asia Minor. The New Testament book called the Acts of the Apostles contains an extensive account of his activities. The letter to the Romans was written in winter 57–58 at Corinth on Paul's third missionary journey. Paul went from there to Jerusalem where he was imprisoned by the civil authorities and taken to Rome; he probably was released in 63, the point at which the the Acts of the Apostles ends. Traditionally Paul died a martyr's death in Rome in 67.

The letter to the Romans is perhaps the most theological of Paul's letters, certainly among the most polished. Its great theme is the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Its immediate occasion may have been the problem of the mixed church in Rome and the tensions between Jewish and pagan Christians, but all we can sure of is that it is a letter of self-introduction.

The argument of the letter:

The anger of God against both pagans and Jews.

Why God is angry against the Jews is easy. They have the Law but they do not keep it, 2:21–2 (bottom of p. 13 of the *Materials*): “You preach against stealing, yet you steal; you forbid adultery, yet you commit adultery; you despise idols, yet you rob their temples.”

Why God is angry against the pagans is more complicated, 2:14–15: “Pagans who never heard of the law but are led by reason to do what the law commands, may not actually ‘possess’ the law but they can be said to ‘be’ the law. They can point to the substance of the law engraved on their hearts—they can call a witness, that is, their own conscience—they have accusation and defense, that is, their own inner mental dialogue.” But where are we to find this law, in the Torah? Yes, of course, but also (and this is the first big move in the letter):

The relationship of faith and law.

3:21: “God's justice that was made known through the Law and the Prophets has now

been revealed outside the Law ... to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. ... [3:31] do we mean that faith makes the Law pointless? Not at all: we are giving the Law its true value.” But that might suggest that the Law is still in force.

7:1: “Brothers, those of you who have studied law will know that laws affect a person only during his lifetime. A married woman, for instance, has legal obligations to her husband while he is alive, but all these obligations come to an end if the husband dies. ... That is why you, my brothers, who through the body of Christ are now dead to the Law, can now give yourself to another husband, to him who rose from the dead to make us productive for God. ... The reason [8:1] therefore why those who are in Christ Jesus are not condemned, it that the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. God has done what the Law, because of our unspiritual nature was unable to do.” But what is now law?

A new law for a new covenant.

13:8–9: “Avoid getting into debt except the debt of mutual love. If you love your fellow men you have carried out your obligations. All the commandments ... are summed up in this single command: You must love your neighbor as yourself.”

13:1: “You must obey the governing authorities. Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God, and so anyone who resists authority is rebelling against God’s decision The state is there to serve God for your benefit. If you break the law, however, you may well have fear; the bearing of the sword has its own significance. The authorities . . . carry out God’s revenge by punishing wrongdoers This is also the reason why you must pay taxes since all government officials are God’s officers”

Some themes.

1. The descending theory of power: “Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God”
2. The sword imagery: “the bearing of the sword has its significance.”
3. The notion of natural law: “Pagans who never heard of the law but are led by reason to do what the law commands”
4. Winnow out the essential from the Mosaic law.
5. The importance of authority but also freedom and equality.
6. The multiplicity of meanings of the word “law”

Some key dates in the legal history of Christianity:

30? — Crucifixion of Jesus

67 — Traditional death of SS. Peter and Paul

70 — First Roman destruction of Jerusalem

c.96 — Letter of Pope Clement I to the Corinthians

c.100 — approximate date of the last canonical books of the New Testament (though some of the epistles, e.g., 2 Peter, are almost certainly later)

132–35 — Bar Cocheba revolt (second Roman destruction of Jerusalem)

mid-2d century — Beginnings of the tradition of pseudo-apostolic canons known as the *didache* (teaching)

2d century — Scattered papal letters concerning heresy and discipline

c.200 — Redaction of the *Mishna* at Jamnia

3d century — Continues papal letters concerning heresy and discipline

3d century — Earliest known local councils or synods (deal with Easter date, baptism conferred by heretics, those lapsed during persecutions, bishops suspected of heresy or irregularly promoted)

312 — Edict of Milan (toleration of Christianity)

325 — Council of Nicea (condemns Arius: Christ ‘of same substance’ as God the Father; disciplinary canons)

366–384, 384–399 — ‘Decretal’ letters of Popes Damasus and Siricius

381 — Council of Constantinople I (confirmation of Nicea; canons)

431 — Council of Ephesus (condemns Nestorius: Mary is ‘Mother of God’)

440–61 — Decretal letters of Pope Leo the Great

451 — Council of Chalcedon (condemns monophysites: Christ has 2 natures)

4th & 5th centuries — Many Western local councils (Rome, Gaul, Spain, Africa) promulgate canons on an ever-wider range of topics

c.500 — Redaction of the *Talmud* (in Babylon and Jerusalem)

c.500 — Redaction of the Dionysiana, a collection of canon law in Rome by Dionysius Exiguus

A Romp Through the early legal history of Christianity:

1. The relative absence of law in Christian writing of the apostolic period
2. A streak of antinomianism?
3. The importance of the letter to the Romans in this regard
4. The 'council of Jerusalem' (Acts 15; Galatians 2)
5. Why this seeming absence of law?
 - a. Jesus in opposition to the legalism of the Pharisees
 - b. Our own preconceptions of what law ought to be like: herewith of *kerygma* and *didache*
 - c. The mission to the gentiles
 - d. Preservation of unity, the concept of *koinonia*
 - e. Diverse ministries become pope, patriarch, bishops, priests, deacons, etc.
6. What happens to all of this in the fourth century? The role of councils and decretals.
7. Are we asking too much of law?
8. Summary: *nomos* and *kanon*.