

Background Information for Reading Romans

- Romans is usually dated in 57 CE.
- “Jews” had been expelled from Rome by Claudius about 49 CE and presumably were able to return after the death of Claudius in 54 CE. (See Acts 18:1)
- Estimates of the population of Rome at the time vary, but average between 500,000 and a million. Half the population were slaves. The number of Jews may have been perhaps 30,000-40,000, many living in a section of Rome now known as Trastevere, across the Tiber from the center of the city.
- The average common letter of the time was less than 100 words. The “letters” of famous orators and thinkers ranged up to 1,000 words. Romans, Paul’s longest, runs over 7,000 words.
- Romans is the only letter of Paul in the NT that is written to a faith community not founded by Paul himself or one of his associates.
- Rom. 15:25-28a refers to Paul’s upcoming travel to Jerusalem to deliver the “collection” for the believers there (see 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8:1-15; 9:6-15).
- Rom. 15:22-24, 28-29 speaks of Paul’s plan to then come to Rome and, hopefully with the support of the believers there, to continue on to evangelization in Spain.
- What we learn from chapter 16
 1. Phoebe carries and probably reads the letter to the believers in Rome. She is a *diakonos* (usually translated deacon), and a *prostatis* (benefactor).
 2. Prisca (wife) and Aquila (husband) [Acts 18:1-3] are co-workers with Paul. A “church” meets in their home.
 3. Junia, a woman, is “prominent among the apostles.”
 4. The names cited are interesting for the number of women and the number associated with slavery. Most are Greco-Roman, but that does not necessarily mean that they are not Jewish.
 5. The Roman “church” consists of a number of house-churches.
 6. Tertius “writes” the letter
- Key words with which we are familiar would have had a remarkably different connotation in the original context. For example:

euangelion, translated “gospel” or “good news” (the same word we have examined in our first session together in Mark 1 and Galatians 2 and now we find in Romans 1:1) was used at the time to refer to the good news of a (Roman) military victory or major event associated with the Emperor:

*When news spread of Vespasian’s accession to the throne, ‘every city
Celebrated the good news and offered sacrifices on his behalf.’ (Josephus)*

kyrios, (lord), was the imperial title for the master of the Roman world, as seen in ancient inscriptions, e.g.

*Nero, the lord of the whole world
Emperor Caesar, god and lord*