The Epistle to the ROMANS

Introduction

It is commonly agreed that the Epistle to the Romans is one of the greatest Christian writings. Its power has been demonstrated again and again at critical points in the history of the Christian church. Augustine of Hippo, for example, was converted through reading a passage from this letter, and thus began a period of the greatest importance for the church. It is not too much to say that at a later time Martin Luther’s spiritual experience was shaped by his coming to grips with what Paul says in this epistle. The Reformation may be regarded as the unleashing of new spiritual life as a result of a renewed understanding of the teaching of Romans. Again, John Wesley’s conversion was triggered by hearing Luther’s Preface to Romans read, a Preface, of course, inspired by the epistle. Nearer to our own day it was Karl Barth’s coming to grips with the message of the book that ended an era of sterile liberalism and ushered in a more fruitful period of biblical theology. But Romans is not for great minds only. The humble believer also finds inspiration and direction in these pages. Romans is not an easy book. But it has always yielded rich dividends to anyone who has taken the time to study it seriously, and it does so still.¹

It is one of a large number of letters, some 14,000 in all, that have come down to us from antiquity. Many are in copies only, but quite often we have the originals. Some letters are very private, being intimate communications within the family or among friends; others are plainly meant for a wider public. In the papyri private letters range in length from 18 words to 209.² More literary letters³ tend to be longer, the subject matter obviously having an influence on length. Cicero’s 796 letters average 295 words with a

1 The continuing relevance of Romans is illustrated by the articles in the January 1980 issue of Interpretation. This whole number is given over to Romans. The articles cover a wide range and leave no doubt about the fact that this epistle still plays a vital role in the life of the church.


3 For a discussion of types of letters in antiquity see especially William G. Doty, “The Classification of Epistolary Literature”, CBQ, XXXI (1969), pp. 183–99; Martin Luther Stirewalt, Jr., “The Form and Function of the Greek Letter-Essay”, Donfried, pp. 175–206. Doty discerns eight classes with up to seven subclasses grouped under his headings, and he does not claim to be exhaustive. He points out that the Hellenistic school handbooks included 21 and later 41 specific types (pp. 196–97).


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range from 22 to 2,530 words, while Seneca's 124 letters range from 149 to 4,134 words with an average length of 995 words. The New Testament letters tend to be longer, though 2 and 3 John are quite short. The 13 Pauline letters average around 1,300 words. Clearly Paul took letter writing very seriously and made it much more of a vehicle for significant teaching than did most people of the ancient world. Romans is his longest letter, with about 7,100 words. Its length as well as the profundity of its subject matter marks it out as a most unusual letter.

**AUTHORSHIP**

The letter claims to have been written by the apostle Paul (1:1), and no serious objection appears ever to have been urged against this claim. The few who have objected have not been able to convince many that their arguments have weight. The style and contents are what we expect of Paul, and the tradition of the church has always accepted this letter as a genuine work of the great apostle.


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