

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

AT THE CLOSE of the year A.D. 56, Paul arrived in Achaia, for a final stay, before taking to Jerusalem the fruit of the generosity of the Christian communities which he had founded among the Gentiles. He remained there three months and departed on the eve of the feast of unleavened bread (Acts 20: 3-6), that is, in the spring of 57. It would seem that it was during the course of this visit that he wrote the Epistle to the Romans.\* The letter shows him to us as just on the point of leaving for Jerusalem (15: 25-26); he conveys to his readers greetings from Gaius his host, who might well have been the person whom he had baptized at Corinth (1 Cor. 1: 14);† he charges Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae, a Corinthian port, to take his letter to those to whom it is addressed.‡

\* The date of the composition of the letter cannot be fixed with complete certainty. Different estimates are made of the time which would have been required for the events which took place after the appearance before Gallio, who was proconsul of Achaia from the spring of 51 to the spring of 52. The possible range of date extends from the end of 54 to the spring of 59. We ourselves adopt the chronology of Maurice Goguel (*Introduction au N.T.*, vol. IV. 2, pp. 201ff.). Similarly M.-J. Lagrange (*Épître aux Romains*, 1931, p. xvii-xx). But W. Michaelis (*Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, 1954, 2nd ed., p. 165) dates the composition as Easter 56, at Philippi, perhaps at Troas. On the other hand, C. H. Dodd (*The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 1932, p. xxxvi) and Otto Michel (*Der Brief an die Römer*, 1955, p. i) date it later, and Ed. Meyer (*Ursprung und Anfänge des Christentums*, III, 1923, pp. 51-54) dates it as late as the winter of 58-59.

† No sure inference can be drawn from the mention of Erastus. In 2 Tim. 4: 20 an Erastus is also named, which proves only that at the time of the composition of 2 Tim. it was believed that there was an Erastus at Corinth.

‡ It has been disputed that the letter was written at Corinth; 15: 25 would seem to suggest that Paul is already on his way; 15: 30-31 shows that he already knows what Acts 20: 3 says he learnt only later. Since the authenticity of ch. 16 as a part of the letter is doubtful, the arguments for composition at Corinth become negligible (see T. M. Taylor: "The Place of Origin of Romans", *J.B.L.*, 1948, pp. 281-296).

The circumstances in which Paul was living at this period of his life do indeed fit in with the writing of a work such as this letter. In fact Paul's last stay in Greece is characterized by certain unique features. The work of the apostle in the eastern basin of the Mediterranean is completed. The main difficulties have been surmounted. The gospel of Jesus Christ has been preached and believed. The name of Christ has been proclaimed everywhere (15: 20). With relative calmness of mind, the apostle to the Gentiles can at this moment make a summary report, as it were, of the work of the preceding years. He is about to crown his activities by taking to the mother congregation the tangible evidence of the unity of Christ's church, the seal confirming the gratitude felt by Gentile believers towards the elect people of God. But he does not merely look backward. For some time now he has been entertaining a project which is no wild adventurer's whim. Christ has called him to be the apostle to the Gentiles, and if his task is completed in the area extending from Jerusalem to Illyria (15: 19) he is thus free to undertake new tasks. The name of Christ must be carried to spheres where it has not so far been proclaimed.

If the apostle imposed on himself the rule not to work where others had already worked, it was no doubt in order to save time. The plan of evangelizing Spain was the fruit of the apostolic conscience of a man whom Christ had set aside for the purpose of making manifest the power of gospel salvation, and that among the barbarians as well as among the Greeks (1: 1-17). Time was pressing; hence the watchword was "Forward!"\* Hence there was added to the apostle's reflection about past achievements the thought of the continuation of his work, one might even say the undertaking of new work, for circumstances lent quite a new stamp to the projected mission to Spain.

\* This note of urgency will be increased if we admit the influence on the apostle's thought of the eschatological motives which Johannes Munck (*Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte*, 1954) has emphasized, somewhat unilaterally, it is true (E. T. *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind*). The apostle believes that his work enters into God's plan and contributes to its realization, the second coming of Christ being the culmination of this plan. This theocentric or Christocentric motive of the mission is certainly an integral part of the apostle's thought and should never be neglected.

The origins of the Christian community in Rome are wrapped in obscurity. There is nothing to show that it was founded by the apostle Peter, which does not however exclude the idea that Peter went to Rome. But neither does it owe its existence to the apostle Paul, as is evident from Rom. 15: 20 and the almost diplomatic care which Paul took in addressing it (1: 5-6).<sup>\*</sup> The capital of the empire saw the influx of so many people within its walls. Likewise the Jewish communities of the Diaspora maintained the closest relations with the mother country. It is no matter for surprise that faith in Jesus as Messiah was carried to Rome by travellers, and particularly by converted Jews.

The Jewish colony in Rome was moreover an important one (numbering about 40,000 souls, many of whom were descended from freedmen).<sup>†</sup> More than once it attracted the attention of the imperial police, and finally, by issuing a decree of expulsion against these Jews, Claudius terminated its legal existence.<sup>‡</sup> This took place in 49. Suetonius links the troubles which arose at this time with the name of a certain Chrestus.<sup>§</sup> It is probable that we should see here the name of

\* Cf. M. Goguel, *op. cit.*, p. 292. Oscar Cullmann, *Saint Pierre, disciple apôtre, martyr*, 1952, p. 69. (E.T. *Peter: Disciple, Apostle, Martyr.*)

† Cf. J. Juster, *Les Juifs dans l'empire romain*, 1914, pp. 209ff. J. B. Frey, "Les communautés juives à Rome aux premiers temps de l'église", *Recherches de science religieuse*, 1930, pp. 275ff. Pompey had brought many Jews as slaves to Rome and they were to a great extent freed later. Some of them returned to Palestine; and it was probably to them that the so-called synagogue of the freedmen (Acts 6: 9) owed its name (cf. Strathmann, *Th.Wb.NT*, vol. IV, p. 269).

‡ Suetonius (*Vit. Claud.*, V, 524). "There was often trouble among the Jews. The emperors and the Romans in general entertained complicated feelings towards them, compounded of hatred for their religious particularism, which was regarded as absurd, scorn for their ritual practices, and a sort of respect for their tenacious originality. They were felt to be a puzzle. Several times the Jews had obtained special concessions towards their religious scruples, for example as regards the cult of imperial images; they were allowed to quarrel among themselves about the nomination of the high priest, or about questions of faith. But if their quarrels threatened to disturb public order, the police would intervene, and with a heavy hand." Eugène Albertini, *L'empire romain (Peuples et Civilisations)* 1929, pp. 95ff.

§ Suetonius (*Vit. Claud.*, 25): "*Judaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes Roma expulsi*". Cf. also Acts 18: 2. Dio Cassius (60: 6) indicates only an interdiction on meetings.

Christ, misspelt as a result of the identical pronunciation which was given at this period to the vowels e and i. If we are right in this supposition, then the disorders which caused the imperial authority to take drastic measures would have arisen in connexion with the development of the Messianic faith at the heart of the Jewish church in Rome. We do not know exactly how events developed. But it seems likely that the edict of Claudius had the result of bringing about a modification, perhaps a profound one, in the composition of the Christian community which was thus deprived of its Jewish-Christian elements. On the other hand, Gentile Christians cannot have been affected by the edict. Later the interdiction against the Jews was toned down or revoked, for after the death of Claudius Judaism in Rome underwent a considerable extension, and, through Poppaea, even gained influence in the immediate circle of Nero.

It is easy to guess the complex problems which must have been raised, for the life of Christian groups in Rome, by this mass return of the Jews in general and of the Jewish Christians in particular. We have absolutely no idea what the proportion of this latter was in the total Christian community of the city. But whatever it may have been, it is essential to realize that, in the absence of the Jewish-Christian element, the young church evolved in a way which made difficult the task of reintegration when the Jewish Christians returned. Doctrine and practices had developed in a way which conflicted with the characteristic sentiments of the latter. There arose in consequence a situation of uneasiness and anxiety. It was perhaps such a situation which Paul had in mind when he wrote chapters 14 and 15: 1-13, although the very general terms which he uses do not allow us to draw any definite conclusions.

Since the useful work of F. C. Baur in referring literary problems to the historical situation by which they are governed, the Letter to the Romans has been subjected to a thorough scrutiny with a view to establishing the scope of the anti-Jewish polemic which is supposed to have inspired it.

A judgment on the letter as a whole has often been orientated by chs. 14 and 15, and the discussion which they

develop has thus been assigned general importance. Critics have been confirmed in this method of approach by the short notice—unlike chs. 14 and 15 of a very violent character—which we read in ch. 16: 17–20. The whole of the last three chapters have been read in the light of this indignant outburst of the apostle. In fact this method is hardly correct. Ch. 16 raises difficult problems and it is doubtful whether it is an authentic part of the original letter. As for chs. 14 and 15, their theme, by contrast with the rest of the letter, is so novel, especially if it is considered above all as a practical problem, that it is surely unwise to make any generalizations on the basis of these chapters.

It is preferable to take as our point of departure the circumstances in which the letter was formulated and the data which it provides itself. Paul does not know the community to which he is writing, and apart from chs. 14–16 he does not in any way take into account what is going on there. The appeals whether direct or indirect which are to be found in the letter (2: 1, 17, 21; 6: 1, 11, 15, 20; 7: 1, 7) may not be considered as the signs of a debate with genuine partners; they are rather so much technical literary procedure, and reflect the style of the diatribe. On the other hand the situation of the apostle when he writes his letter, and which the letter itself discloses, turns our mind in a different direction. Paul has finished the work which he has undertaken; he himself tells us this. The countries he has visited form as it were an “ecclesiastical province” centring in Jerusalem, a homogeneous area of which the holy city is the focus.\* The collection for the saints at Jerusalem is the concrete sign and evidence of this geographical and ecclesiastical homogeneity. But this action, the spiritual implications of which are so tremendous, also marks the end of an epoch and of a certain field of activity.

Paul considers that henceforth there is no longer scope for his missionary work in the east; in that area he has carried the preaching of the gospel to a point of perfection and to a fullness (*πεπληρωκέναι*, 15: 19) which obliges him to turn towards other horizons and to open a new chapter in the proclamation of the gospel to the Gentile world. He is now about to leave the “ecclesiastical province” of Jerusalem. We

\* As is suggested by the difficult *κύκλω* of 15: 19.

should hardly be justified in supposing that his insistence on doing this deed of homage to Jerusalem is for him a way of taking leave of the mother church. Nevertheless his departure for the distant land of Spain will remove him by so great a distance from Jerusalem that he can no longer say that he is working concentrically from the latter city. Thus he writes to Rome in order to create a feeling of spiritual and material solidarity with the church of the capital without which his mission would be both false and impossible, since it would become a purely individual undertaking. When Paul writes to Rome his mind is full of his Spanish scheme.

If we feel that the letter is to be judged in the light of this close relation to a new evangelistic plan, we shall not wish to seek the motivation of its themes in the special situation of the church to which it is addressed. Not that we should be justified in discovering in these pages a dogmatic treatise clad in epistolary guise. It is with justice that both the Tübingen school and its recent antagonist, J. Munck, have reacted against this method of approach. Paul never wrote, so far as we know, except in regard to essential and immediate tasks; he always took up his pen under the pressure of the urgencies of his mission. There is nothing in him of the academic theologian. The letter written from Corinth to Rome is no exception to this rule.

However, in this particular case, Paul no longer has to deal with purely local questions. In the situation in which we now see him at Corinth, at the conclusion of his work in the east, Paul finds himself confronted by the problem implied in the enormous extension of the church. The pause which he now makes, in a tranquillity which he but rarely enjoys, enables him to view the development of the Christian mission with a gaze which takes in the whole sweep of the work already accomplished, while his meditation on the project of evangelizing the west brings to his survey of the past unlimited future prolongations foreseen by his missionary zeal. The letter to the Romans is the fruit of this meditation. While being a missionary document on the same basis as the other letters, it expresses, better than any other, certain fundamental aspects of missionary problematics.\*

\* Cf. J. Munck, *op. cit.* p. 297 and *passim*.