

Further resources for the 'Friends Romans' feature in *The Reader* August 2005.

1. Christianity in Rome

Christianity came early to Rome, arriving in this great city which was the heart of the Roman empire, years before either Paul or Peter visited the city.

The first Christians in Rome were Jewish by birth. They may have heard the news about Jesus Christ from fellow Jews who travelled from Jerusalem or the great cities of the eastern Mediterranean such as Antioch. Perhaps they had come to Rome as merchants, perhaps they were brought to Rome as slaves or freedmen in the entourage of important men. There was an Aristobulus, from the royal family of Herod the Great, who came to live in Rome during this period. Are those who are described in Romans 16.10 as belonging to the 'household of Aristobulus' connected with this man, perhaps his slaves or his servants?

These first Jewish Christians were probably fairly conservative: worshipping in synagogues, keeping the law, proud of their Jewish heritage, believing perhaps that to become a true follower of Jesus Christ you needed first to become a Jew. We seem to hear about them from a Christian writer of the fourth century: *It is evident that there were Jews living in Rome... in the time of the apostles. Some of these Jews, who had come to believe in Christ passed on to the Romans that they should acknowledge Christ and keep the law... One ought not to be angry with the Romans, but praise their faith, because without seeing any signs of miracles and without any of the apostles they came to embrace faith in Christ, though according to a Jewish rite.* (Ambrosiaster, 4th Century)

These Jewish Christians were supported by the conservative wing of the church in Jerusalem - the group associated with James. Perhaps 'apostles' were sent from Jerusalem to encourage them, figures such as Andronicus and Junia. But hostility was stirred between Christian and non-Christian Jews to such an extent that in 49AD in the reign of the Emperor Claudius there were riots. In the Roman historian Suetonius we read '*Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from Rome.*'

Probably Suetonius writing without first hand knowledge mistook 'Christus' for 'Chrestus' and also believed that Christus had been personally responsible for the riots.

At any rate it seems that in 49AD the Jewish Christians, or at least their leaders, were expelled from Rome along with other Jews. As a result Aquila and Prisca left the city and travelled to Corinth. They had probably themselves already been followers of Jesus in Rome, but their close association with Paul over the next few years seems to have encouraged them to become more radical and open in their approach to Gentiles.

Return to Rome

The time of Jewish exile from Rome was not long lasting. Certainly by the beginning of Nero's reign (54AD) Jews were allowed back, and we assume that this meant Jewish Christians as well. But while they had been away from the city important developments had been taking place in Rome. A number of Gentile Christian groups had begun to spring up around the city, each one forming a different 'house church'. In many cases individual groups were centred on a particular 'household', and comprised many of the slaves, freedmen, and perhaps even family that formed this social unit. We don't exactly know how these Gentile house-churches had heard the gospel. However given the fact that people travelled frequently between Rome and its provinces, it is quite likely that those who had been in Greece or Asia Minor on imperial business or for trade heard about Jesus there and brought the faith back when they returned to Rome. Some of these people were perhaps known to Paul personally: the majority probably were not. They may well have picked up religious ideas that Paul would not have approved of - the kind of theological views that Paul is fighting against in his letters to the Corinthians. Some of them may have been quite hostile to anything that felt too Jewish.

House churches

So when Aquila and Prisca returned to Rome (perhaps as a kind of vanguard for Paul) they probably found several different groups in Rome who all thought of themselves as followers of Jesus, met in separate locations, didn't have very much to do with each other, and most likely had some pretty fundamental theological differences. These would have included:

- Jewish Christians who felt it important to keep the law and considered themselves still to be Jews, still remaining part of the 'synagogue'.
- Several groups of Gentile Christians who wanted to keep their distance from things that felt too Jewish.

Both the above may well not have known Paul personally and/or been very suspicious of him.

- There was also a group associated with Aquila and Prisca who stood somewhere between these two viewpoints.

It's into this situation that Paul wrote his letter to the Romans to try and open doors for his projected visit to the city. How will we receive what this man Paul has to say?

2. Further details about the members of the Christian community mentioned in Romans 16.

Paul's readers in Rome

The following list is designed to help 'flesh out' the list of names given in Romans 16, so that people can 'get into role'. Details that can be gleaned from the New Testament are printed in solid type, while 'hypothetical' information appears in italics.

Phoebe

Phoebe is carrying Paul's letter from Corinth. She is a woman of *about 40* who lives at Cenchreae, one of the ports of Corinth. She is described as a minister or 'deacon' of the church there. Her name suggests that she is a Greek Gentile in origin, *perhaps with a bit of a colourful 'background'*. The word *prostatis* (RSV = helper) suggests that she was quite rich, and acted as a kind of patron for the Christian community in that town. We suggest you regard Phoebe as an independent and moderately wealthy business woman (*probably involved in commerce import-export business*). She has come to Rome either on commercial business or the word 'business' may suggest that she is involved in a lawsuit which has necessitated her visit to the capital.

Prisca (Priscilla)

Along with her husband Aquila a long-standing friend and colleague of Paul. She is Jewish in origin, and had lived in Rome as a member of the Jewish-Christian community there until she and others were expelled from Rome at the time of the Emperor Claudius. She and Aquila then travelled to Corinth where they first met Paul, offered him hospitality in their own home and seem to have risked their own lives to save him from danger. (*Acts 18.1-4*) They later journeyed with him to Ephesus. Remaining at Ephesus after Paul's departure from that city they came across Apollos and were instrumental in both encouraging and educating him. (*Acts 18.26*). Probably Apollos was more traditionally 'Jewish' than were Paul and his friends at this time. When permitted to they returned to Rome, and quickly established a group of Christians based on their own house. What is their relationship to the Gentile church that has developed during their absence from Rome? And what is their relationship to perhaps more traditionally minded Jewish-Christians?

Aquila

Prisca's husband. A Jew, originally from Pontus (on the shore of the Black Sea) but had spent time in Rome before being expelled along with Prisca during the time of Claudius. See notes on Prisca. He was (like Paul) a tent-maker. It is notable that Paul lists Prisca before Aquila - *she may well have been the more prominent member of the Christian community*. It is probable that Prisca and Aquila were Paul's sources of information about

the situation in the Roman community. It is suggested that Prisca and Aquila's return to Rome may have been at Paul's request - to set up a kind of Christian vanguard for him.

The church that meets at Prisca and Aquila's house

This phrase is probably intended to include Epanaetus and maybe Mary (*below*) but you might want to 'add' other names if you have enough people to play the roles. (*see below for additional names*)

Epanaetus

A male Gentile Christian, not a native Roman - *probably of Greek stock*. He had come to Rome from Asia (this refers to Asia Minor - part of modern Turkey). The capital of Asia was Ephesus, *and it is probable that Epanaetus had met Prisca and Aquila there, travelled with them to Rome, and was a member of their house church*. He is described as the first convert for Christ in Asia, or more literally the 'first fruits for Christ in Asia' : *does that mean that his conversion sparked off many more? Later tradition held that he became a bishop in Carthage.*

Mary

A Jewish Christian woman. The fact that she is described as working hard amongst YOU may mean she was not known personally to Paul.

Others of the Aquila-Prisca group

These are all imaginary - but names like Diognetus, Nicolaos, Selene, Chrysos, Manaon, Dorcas might be appropriate.

Andronicus

Although he has a Latinized name, Paul's description of him makes it clear that he was Jewish, and a Christian of long-standing. Paul calls him his 'fellow country-man' - a word that could even mean relative. *He may well have been a leader of the more conservative faction among Jewish-Christians in Rome. The term 'apostle' is interesting, and probably means that he had been 'sent' to Rome by the Jerusalem Jewish Hellenistic-Christian community. Andronicus and Junia may have even been the founders of the original Roman Jewish-Christian community.* Since Paul regarded himself as THE apostle to the Gentiles, this suggests that Andronicus saw his ministry among fellow Jews. Paul goes out of his way to commend Andronicus (and Junia), commenting on the way they too have suffered for the gospel. Presumably Paul needed to win over these influential people if his purpose in writing to the Romans was to be fulfilled.

Junia

Probably a woman, *and quite likely the wife of Andronicus*. All that is said about him also applies to her. They worked as a married missionary couple. The description of the woman Junia as an 'apostle' created problems for medieval Christian writers who could not believe that a woman could be described as an apostle. So eventually the name Junia was masculinised and she was regarded as a he!

Ampliatius

Known to Paul. The name Ampliatius was often used for slaves or freedmen. The name is Latin, but he might actually be Jewish in origin: Ampliatius is actually a Latin 'translation' of the Jewish name Joseph.

Urbanus

A Gentile, probably a slave born and currently living in Rome. It's a common Roman slave name. There was an Urbanus who was a slave in the emperor's household: *could there be a link?* However since he is described as a 'fellow worker' of Paul, *does this mean that he had met Paul in the east at some point?*

Stachys

Like all those called beloved/dear friend he was probably known personally to Paul. His name suggests that he was of Greek origin, *but may well also have been a slave in Rome (again possibly in the emperor's household).*

Apelles

A name which was Greek but often used by Greek-speaking Jews. Apelles had obviously 'proved' his faith in some way - *perhaps by suffering persecution.* We suggest you regard Apelles as Jewish-Christian. Perhaps he might have been one of those who originally followed Apollos - but was brought to a fuller understanding of the Christian faith by Paul, Prisca and Aquila.

Aristobulus' household

It is not at all clear whether Aristobulus was himself a Christian. Those of Aristobulus' 'household' may well mean the slaves *etc* of Aristobulus without necessarily commenting on Aristobulus' own faith. (Some translations refer to the 'family' of Aristobulus, but 'household' may be more accurate.)

The Aristobulus referred to could well be a royal figure who was the grandson of Herod the Great and brother of Herod Agrippa 1. He was also a friend of the Emperor Claudius and lived in Rome for a long time. It is possible that when he journeyed to Rome from the east he brought Christian slaves with him in his household - and this could have been a key factor in establishing the church in Rome. If this is the Aristobulus referred to, he died in Rome 45-48, so would have been dead by the time this letter was written. So it would be possible that some of his actual family had become Christians.

We give hypothetical names for some of Aristobulus' household: *eg* Mariamne, Philippos, Salome, Antipater.

Herodion

The description 'fellow countryman' /kinsman again emphasises the Jewishness of this person. *He may well have been a freedman of one of the Herods - perhaps even Aristobulus.*

Household of Narcissus

As with Aristobulus the suggestion is that Paul is referring to the slaves or employees of Narcissus. *Note from Paul's description that they were not all Christian. There was a famous Narcissus who was himself a former freedman and who acted as the secretary of Emperor Claudius, and who was forced to commit suicide at the beginning of Nero's reign.* The Christians of his household were probably Gentiles. If the Narcissus referred to was Claudius' secretary it illustrates how close Christians were to the centre of power in Rome.

'Hypothetical' members of Narcissus' household might be: Aulus, Aeneas, Sabina, Camilla, Tullia, Servus.

Tryphaena

A Gentile woman, who has 'worked hard' for the church.

Tryphosa

Another Gentile Christian woman, *probably the sister of Tryphaena.*

Persis

A woman clearly known to Paul. Persis was a name often used for a female slave.

Rufus

Is this the son of Simon of Cyrene? There is a Rufus mentioned in Mark 15.21. In which case he was presumably of Jewish origin and originally from the eastern Mediterranean.

Rufus' mother

It does seem that the family of Rufus must have been significant in the early church. Presumably the mother of Rufus could have been the wife of Simon of Cyrene. Paul's words suggest that he remembers receiving a particular kindness from her.

Asyncritus

This person and the following people were probably not known personally to Paul. A Gentile, perhaps a slave or freedman. There was a freedman of the Emperor Augustus called by this name.

Phlegon

A male name, often given to slaves.

Hermes

The name of a Greek god, therefore presumably the Hermes in this list was a Gentile by origin. The name was often given to slaves.

Patrobas

Another name given to slaves or freedman - probably Gentile. There was a freedman who became a friend of Nero who had this name.

Hermas

There was a famous Christian text written in Rome called 'the Shepherd of Hermas'. *Could this Hermas have been the author? And the brothers who are with them eg (hypothetically) Helios, Selene, Titus, Domitilla.*

Philologus

A Gentile name often given to slaves or freedmen.

Julia

Probably the wife of Philologus. A Gentile woman.

Nereus

Probably the son of Philologus and Julia.

Nereus's sister Olympas

Associated with the Philologus and Julia group of Christians.

3. Key aspects of the theology of Paul (particularly helpful for the second section of the resource)

There is one key metaphor or symbol that underlies the whole of the letter to the Romans. We need to be aware of this before we can properly either understand Romans, or Paul's theology as a whole. It is the parallel and contrast that Paul draws between the stories Adam and Christ. It is clearly present in **Romans 5.1-14** but also underlies the thoughts expressed in **Romans 1.5, 6.1-8.39, 16.19-27**.

Paul's ideas are brilliantly set out in *The New Testament World (CUP)* by John and Kathleen Court. They explain it as follows:

Paul's ideas

* Adam was the man who brought sin into human existence and Christ was the man who dealt with the problem

- Adam was tempted and sinned, thus bringing humanity out of the garden paradise into the wilderness.
- Christ came into the wilderness, was tempted, and withstood the devil, thus opening the way back into paradise.
- Adam is a symbolic figure, representing all humanity, so that Adam's sin was humanity's sin. (*see Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15.45-49*)
- Similarly, Christ is a symbolic figure, representing the whole of the new humanity, so that his righteousness is humanity's righteousness.
- Humanity shares Adam's guilt, by virtue of its unity with him, and expresses this 'original sin' by living sinfully. Similarly, by virtue of its unity with Christ in faith, humanity may be accounted as righteous as he is, and may express this righteousness by living like him.

Three things follow on from this:

- a. Paul's basic understanding of Christian baptism was that it was the means by which a believer could be 'transferred' from the body of Adam and incorporated into the Body of Christ. Not everybody in the early Church saw baptism in such a way - certainly Jewish Christians probably had an understanding that was much closer to that of John the Baptist who 'baptised' people as simply a symbolic way of making them 'clean'.
Other Christians may have considered Christian baptism as rather like being initiated into one of the mystery cults that were very popular in the Greek and Roman world. It is true that Paul himself does describe baptism using language that would have been familiar to non-Christians who knew about the mystery cults (it is a sign that Paul is a good missionary - trying to 'speak the language' of those he wanted to convert to the Christian faith!) But Paul always links this 'initiation' to the broader concept of being part of Adam or Christ.
- b. For Paul there was a close link between baptism and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The baptismal action of going down under the waters was a visual reminder that when believers were baptised they somehow shared in a special way in the moment of Jesus' death and went down into the tomb with him. As they rose from the waters they became part of his resurrection body. It is no accident that some early Christian frescoes that decorate a baptismal pool in Dura-Europos show the empty tomb.
- c. Paul's view of the Adam/Christ parallel, and his understanding of baptism meant that the unity and inter-connectedness of the Church were of key importance to him. If Christians were called to be part of 'the body of Christ' - well then, you couldn't have lots of separate bodies who had nothing to do with each other. It would make a mockery of the metaphor and the symbolism. So a crucial part of Paul's purpose in writing to the Christians in Rome was to foster unity between the different groups of Christians in Rome, who as we suggested last week, may have been quite hostile to those outside their own little enclave.

4. Prayers and activity suggestion

Prayers

a. O God, you are always the same. Our fathers worshipped you and called you Father because they trusted you. Every generation has offered you worship believing in your constant love. We are your Church today, conscious of a changing world but more conscious of your unchanging power; aware of the fickle nature of our own devotion but more aware of the permanence of your care over all your creatures; sensitive to the uncertainties of human life but more sensitive to the certainties of your truth. Amen.

b. *This prayer of thanksgiving uses the simple act of lighting night-lights or candles. The first one should be taller than the others, and central. Each sentence is offered by a different voice, and the prayer works best if people are gathered in a circle.*

Voice: I light a candle for Jesus, the Christ.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for the apostles, sent out to be Christ's Church.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for the Scriptures, Hebrew and Christian, in which we may discern the word that enlivens us.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for the wise thinkers - the Fathers and Mothers - of the early Church.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for theologians through the ages: for their learning and study and new insights.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for the faithful people of God, in whose love and lives the ongoing Church of Christ is realised.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for worship - colourful and quiet, exuberant and contemplative: for word and silence, movement and stillness, singing and sighing.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for Christian art and literature and music, and for symbols which point us to God.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for strength of conviction.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for questioning, for journeying in the wilderness, and living on the edge.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for our rich diversity.

All: Thanks be to God.

Voice: I light a candle for our blessed connectedness in the love of Christ.

c. O eternal Lord God, we your children lift grateful thanks to you for our elder brethren in the household of faith:

For Abraham, the father of the faithful:

Blessed are you, Lord God of Israel.

For Jesus, your Christ, your Word in human form, Mediator of the new Covenant, Saviour of humanity, King of saints:

Praise be to you, O God and to your Christ.

For Peter and the other first disciples who left all to follow him and found his Church:

Praise be to you, O God and to your Christ.

For your servant Paul, who so richly experienced the grace of the Risen Lord, and interpreted him to the nations:

Praise be to you, O God and to your Christ.

For the messengers, known and unknown, who brought the Good News to our own country:

Praise be to you, O God and to your Christ.

For all who have gone to the ends of the earth to share your love in Christ Jesus:

Praise be to you, O God and to your Christ.

For the mighty company of every race and nation who worship in your presence:
Praise be to you, O King of saints.

Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be
unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.
(After George Appleton)

d. ‘The Church is meant to be: a laboratory of peace, a parable of the Kingdom, a sign of contradiction among the nations, a place of welcome amidst the sectarianism and xenophobia of the surrounding society, a community of praise.’
(Brother Leonard of Taizé)

e. Lord, as I look back on the journey of my life
help me accept myself as I am and let you love me;
to be thankful for all that is good in what I have remembered;
to recognise where I have failed and accept your forgiveness;
to live in love and care for others.
Father, call me forward into whatever lies ahead,
as you called Abraham.
Jesus, walk the road with me,
as you travelled with your disciples towards Emmaus.
Spirit, inspire and equip me,
as you did with Paul.
May I never cease travelling
until I reach the journey’s end in you, Lord.
(Simon Oxley)

Activity suggestion

Over the week or weeks that people engage with this resource material invite them to write their response to Paul. At the end of the course gather up and share (as appropriate) these responses.