

What You Need to Know About Romans: Context, Culture, and Conflict

Origin of the Church at Rome

Little is known about the origin of the original house churches in Rome. Many scholars believe that the early church was established by Jews who had journeyed to Jerusalem and been converted to Christianity at the time of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-12). However, we do know that Christianity was well established in Rome by the late 40s A.D. The early Roman church was primarily made up of Jews, but as with most early churches, many Gentile converts joined as well.

Roman Culture

The city of Rome was home to both the wealthy and the impoverished, with several economic classes in between. As far as religion, the Romans were heavily influenced by Greek Mythology, and they were also fairly tolerant of other polytheistic religions. However, the Roman government only permitted various forms of religion as long as they included worship of the Emperor. This meant that monotheistic religions, including both Judaism and Christianity, were open to persecution. In fact, in A.D. 49, the Roman Emperor Claudius went so far as to expel all Jews from Rome. This historic event was hugely influential in the development of the early churches in Rome—these congregations that had been previously dominated by Jews were now almost wholly Gentile in their make-up.

Return of the Jews to a Primarily Gentile Church

In A.D. 54, Emperor Claudius died, and Jews were allowed to return to Rome under the new governance. As they arrived and began reuniting with other believers, they would have found the churches they had left to be a very different place. As Gentile Christians had by default taken over the leadership of the church, they would not have placed the same emphasis on topics such as circumcision, eating kosher, or celebrating Jewish Holy Days. In short, churches that had been under Jewish leadership and reflected a distinctively Jewish culture were now led by Gentiles and influenced by their culture. This created significant tension around who was in charge, what church should look like, and how they would move forward.

Paul Addresses Conflict between Jews and Gentiles

At the time the epistle to the Romans was written (around A.D. 57), the Roman church was intensely divided over issues between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Although Paul had never been to Rome in person, he was invested in the future of the church there for multiple reasons—mainly, he saw the Roman Church as a launching point for Christianity to move westward to Spain. However, these believers would not be effective vehicles for the gospel if they were not united. As a result, we have Paul's letter to the Romans—he addresses the root of the division within the church and provides the best and only answer—the gospel.

