

## Notes on Romans 16

This is a synopsis with minor modifications and additions of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

### a. Commendation and greetings 16.1-16

The fact that Romans contains more personal greetings than the rest of Paul's letters put together alerts us that there may be something special afoot here. Indeed, when Paul writes to churches he knows well there is a remarkable absence of named greetings (1&2Co, Ga, Ph, 1&2Th); there are a few messages from Paul's present companions, but otherwise general greetings to the church, without specification (1Co 16.15-18 is a commendation of the three messengers who came to Paul from Corinth, not a greeting as such). The closest we come is the two names in Col 4.15,17— significantly, another church Paul had neither founded nor visited. We could almost formulate it as a rule: if Paul knows the church, he does not name individuals. And anyone who has had to make a speech or write a letter to a community they know well will understand why: Mention one, and you have to mention everyone.

This does not by itself explain the very large number of names here, or how Paul knew so many people in Rome. On the latter point, we should take it for granted that there was considerable mobility among the early Christians. Roads were good, travel as easy as it had ever been, and some people, like Phoebe in 16.1, were evidently financially independent and able to move about for business or personal reasons. Others, like Prisca and Aquila (16.3), had been in both Corinth (Ac 18.2) and Ephesus (1Co 16.19), having traveled there with Paul (Ac 18.18); but, being from Rome, they would likely have returned there after Claudius's death. And they would have stayed in touch with Paul and given him information about the churches there. It is likely too that sev-

eral others of his acquaintance had found their way there as well.

But why mention so many? We can't be sure, but the situation of 14.1–15.13 suggests an answer. In five cases, Paul mentions, along with a name or pair of names, the Christians within a household (16.5a, 10-11,14-15). And he would certainly have been keen to mention all the household churches he knew. We can only guess which ones might have been 'weak' and which 'strong', but given what he's just been saying in the previous chapter, he would have been careful to greet them all with equal enthusiasm. He would not want to arrive at Rome and find that he had caused fresh divisions by appearing to favor one group over another.

#### (1) Phoebe 16.1-2

In 2Co, Paul speaks with heavy irony about needing 'letters of recommendation' for or from the church there (2Co 3.1-3; cf. Ac 18.27; Col 4.10). They knew him and he knew them. To write a letter at all would be to lie about their relationship. But 'letters of recommendation' were vital in the ancient world, where, without electronic communication, anybody could turn up in a town claiming to be somebody else. If today we still need letters of reference for employment or immigration purposes, how much more necessary were they in Paul's world.

The person Paul commends in 16.1-2 is Phoebe, whose home is in Cenchreae, the eastern port of Corinth (in the days before the canal, Corinth had two ports, with arrangements to drag ships across the isthmus). The implication is that Phoebe is a businesswoman who is able to travel independently, and for Paul to trust her with a letter like this speaks volumes for the respect in which she was held; so it is no surprise to discover that she is a deacon in the church. Attempts to make *diakonos* mean

something else fail: to call her a 'servant of the church', with the NIV, does indeed offer a valid translation of the word, but it merely pushes the problem on a stage, since that would either mean that Phoebe was a paid employee of the church (to do what?) or that there was an order of ministry, otherwise unknown, called 'servants'. 'Minister' (REB) is imprecise, because that word is used for several pastoral offices in today's church; 'deaconess' (RSV; JB, NJB) is inaccurate, because it implies that Phoebe belonged to a specific order, of female church workers (possibly hospital workers) quite different from 'deacons'. She was in a position of leadership, and Paul respected her as such and expected the Roman church to do so as well. He requests, as people did and still do in such letters, the kind of help that a traveler may need; and adds his commendation on the grounds that she has herself been a benefactor to many, himself included. The word 'benefactor' means much more, in Paul's world, than simply 'she has been a great help' (NIV): benefaction and patronage were a vital part of the culture, and this makes Phoebe someone to be reckoned with socially and financially as well as simply a sister in the Lord and a leader in her local church.

**(2) Prisca and Aquila 16.3-5a**

Prisca and Aquila are known from Acts 18.2,26; 1Co 16.19; and 2Tim 4.19. Acts calls Prisca 'Priscilla'. They seem to have been among Paul's closest friends, being, like him, tentmakers. How they had 'risked their necks' for him is not known, but clearly they were well known in both Corinth and Ephesus, being capable of setting even someone like Apollos straight in his teaching. They had now returned to Rome, having left because of Claudius's edict. Their house is the first of the 'house-churches' Paul mentions.

**(3) Others 16.5b-16**

The details of the names that follow are mostly of interest only in that they may possibly reflect the ethnic composition of the church, though this is inevitably speculative. Prisca and Aquila were certainly Jews (16.3-5a), as were Andronicus and Junia (16.7), and Herodion (16.11); Mary (16.6) may have been as well. Paul's comments on the persons concerned, though, are sometimes worth pondering. Epānetus (16.5b) was the 'first fruits of Asia into the Messiah', which presumably means he was the first to be baptized, the sign of more to come (cf. 1Co 16.15, where Stephanas has the same honor in Achaëa). Mary (16.6) has 'worked hard for you', perhaps in prayer (cf. Col 4.1 2-13).

Andronicus and Junia (16.7) are kinsfolk of Paul (this may mean simply that they are Jewish; NRSV and NIV suggest closer relatives, but on what basis?); they had been in

prison with him, perhaps in Ephesus, and since they had been 'in the Messiah' before Paul himself, that must mean that they had been Christians since before the gospel came to Asia Minor or indeed anywhere much outside the Levant. They were therefore probably themselves traveling Christians, whose journeys had already intersected with Paul's, and were in Rome ahead of him. They are man and woman, perhaps husband and wife or brother and sister.<sup>1</sup> This is the more interesting in that they are 'of note among the apostles'— perhaps meaning that both of them were witnesses of the resurrection (1Co 9.1, cf. Acts 1.22); perhaps they were among the 'five hundred at once' of 1Co 15.6. Junia is thus a female 'apostle', the only one so called; though presumably others, such as Mary Magdalene, were known as such as well.

Ampliatius, Urbanus, Stachys, and Apelles (the last of whom could conceivably be another Jewish member of the list) are greeted briefly (16.8-10a). The first three are known to Paul personally, and saying that Apelles is 'approved in the Messiah' perhaps means simply that Paul has heard good things of him though he does not know him personally. The 'family' or 'household' or Aristobulus (the phrase means simply 'those of Aristobulus') is perhaps another house church (16.10b); it is implied that Aristobulus himself is not a member, though, and perhaps it simply means that a group of believers had grown up within his household. Aristobulus may have been the brother of Herod Agrippa, who died in 48/49CE; the household might well continue to be known under his name. If he was the brother of Herod, it would be natural to mention a 'Herodion' in the next breath (16.11a), presumably a freedman in the service of the household. What relation he is to Paul, or whether (as in 16.7) this simply means that he too is a fellow Jew, we cannot know. The mention of Narcissus (16.11b) introduces a famous name in mid-century Rome: a freedman who rose to great heights under Claudius, only to incur the jealousy of many Romans and to be forced into suicide after Claudius's death. If this is the same man, as most assume, Christians within his household after his death would have occupied a challenging and dangerous position. But there is so much we don't know.

Tryphena and Tryphosa (16.12a) increase the number of women in the list, as does Persis (16.12b); all three hard workers in the Lord. Rufus (16.13) may perhaps be the

<sup>1</sup> The KJV has 'Junia', though until recently most other versions read 'Junias', the masc. form. See R.S. Cervin, 'A Note Regarding the Name 'Junia(s)' in Romans 16.7', *NTS* 40/3 (1994) 464-70, demonstrating that the name is certainly fem., despite the desperate attempts of many earlier lexicographers, some mss., and some translators to this day, to suggest otherwise.

son of Simon of Cyrene (Mk 15.21) as later tradition would have it, though it was a common enough name. His mother, who remains unnamed, had been a metaphorical mother to Paul at some stage, though in what place and circumstances we do not know. Like watching a sequence of film clips going by too fast to take in, we catch tiny glimpses into the world of early Christianity that could be very revealing if only we could freeze the frame and ask one or two leading questions. Clearly, a subculture was growing, but we know almost nothing about it.

Rm 16.14 greets five more people 'and the family with them', presumably another house church (where, we want to ask, would they have been on the map of 14.1-15.13? What would they be thinking by this stage of the letter?). Rm 16.15 greets five more people, including two male and female pairings; some have speculated that Philologus and Julia were husband and wife, with Nereus and his sister being their children. They, with Olympas, play host to another house-church ('all the saints with them'). Rm 16.16 commands the church to give one another the greeting that was already in common use, 'the kiss of peace' or 'the holy kiss' (cf. 1Co 16.20; 2Co 13.12; 1Th 5.26; 1P 5.14; Justin Martyr *Apology* 1.65). A general greeting from 'all the Messiah's churches' concludes the list (16.16b).

What do we learn about the Roman church, or even about the purpose of the letter, from this list? Not very much; but if we are right to see the extraordinary number of names as a sign of Paul's attempt to greet the different parts of the church, perhaps including some groups that were not on good terms with one another, we might speculate on the size of the church as a whole. If there are five groups mentioned here (see above), and if each house-church had between, say, six and twenty members, the total number of Christians in Rome would be somewhere between 30 and 100. If each group was as big as the average Russian Orthodox parish in America, it would be about 400. If the people with Jewish names represented communities that still adhered to Jewish customs (though this would not be true of Paul himself, nor most likely Prisca and Aquila, and possibly not for Paul's kinsfolk— which accounts for most of the Jewish names), then we might have a sense of which were the 'weak' and which the 'strong'. But this is speculative. 'Weak' members may have lived within otherwise 'strong' house-churches, or vice versa, rather than entire communities that were solidly committed to one line of practice or the other. But if there is any truth to all of this, then what we do see is a small, vulnerable church, needing to know and trust one another across various boundaries; many of whose members were not native to

Rome, living most likely in immigrant communities within particular areas; a church in which men and women alike had leadership roles; a church where the extended households of wealthy (and therefore slave-holding) families formed the basis of worshipping communities. There is something both attractive and frightening about this picture: enormous potential, huge risks, a community both lively and vulnerable. This is the community that was the first to hear one of the greatest letters in the history of the world.

#### **b. Watch out for divisions 16.17-20**

We might now have expected greetings from Paul's companions, and a conclusion, but before that Paul throws in a further sharp word of exhortation. It almost sounds as if it had been inserted from another letter, though there is no textual evidence to suggest so. Perhaps, as Paul thinks and prays about these small house-churches, he has had a sudden stab of anxiety. Do they, he wonders, need to be warned that there are fierce wolves on the loose, who will not spare the flock (cf. Ac 20.29-31)?

The opening warning (16.17) tells them to 'watch out for' (NIV) or 'keep an eye on' (NRSV) those who cause dissensions and put 'enticements' (*skandala* does not mean 'obstacles!') in your way, going against the basic Christian teaching that they have received. They are to keep away from them (though how, within a small community, is not clear). This command echoes Paul's disciplinary warnings elsewhere (e.g., 1Co 5.9-13), not the questions at stake in 14.1-15.13.

This is then backed up with an explanation (*gar*, 16.18) of what sort of people these may be. They are not serving 'our Lord the Messiah'. Instead, they are serving (literally) 'their own bellies', presumably meaning 'appetites' in general (so NRSV and NIV). This is standard polemical language in the Jewish world of Paul's day, and normally means that the people concerned appear to be denying or abandoning some central part of the faith or teaching; the general tone makes it difficult to insist that the problem must be the same as that in Ph 3.18-19, where similar language is used. They are smooth talkers, deceiving the hearts of those who are too innocent for their own good. Paul is quick to assure his hearers that he is confident of their 'obedience', since it is well known to all (cf. 1.8); but it is important that they supplement this with a mature wisdom (cp Mt 10.16, 'wise as serpents, innocent as doves').

Once again (16.20) Paul concludes a train of thought with a blessing. By contrast with 15.5,13,33, though, we catch a darker tone. He evokes Gn 3.15: the 'God of peace will see to it that 'the satan' will be crushed under

your feet (cf. Luke 10.17-19, and behind that Ps 91.13; see also Rv 12.10-11). Elsewhere Paul sees the young church vulnerable to enemy attack; it was part of his theology of new creation that the church was now, like Adam and Eve, open to fresh deceit (2Co 11.3). But his earlier exposition of the victory of God in Jesus the Messiah over the sin of Adam and all its entail (5.12-21) enables him here simply to promise that the victory promised in Genesis will be theirs, and that it will come soon. He adds a brief greeting ('the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you'), which some mss. have at 16.24, but most scholars believe that it belongs here.

This short warning, coming between Paul's greetings to friends in Rome and Paul's friends' greetings, functions rhetorically like the sudden reminder that breaks into a family farewell scene: 'Don't forget to water the plants!' 'Make sure you take your medicine!' It is clearly heartfelt; Paul knows that troublemakers will surface in any church. There is no way of telling what he is thinking or whether it's even specific. He is warning against any attempt to pull church members away from faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

### **c. Greetings from Paul's colleagues 16.21-24**

In the final three verses (16.21-24) before the concluding doxology, Paul's friends add their greetings. Timothy (16.21a) is well known to readers of Paul. According to Ac 16.1-3, he is the apostle's hand-picked younger colleague, and we see him either by Paul's side or running his errands at several points in the letters (e.g., 1Co 4.17; 16.10; 1Th 3.2,6). Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater are not so well known, but they, like some in Rome, are kinsfolk of Paul's (see the discussion of 16.7,11; *syngeneis* may mean 'fellow Jews' or it may imply a closer relation). These are a reminder that, though Paul's grief at his kinsfolk in 9.1-3 was real and deep, some of them at least were alongside him (cf. Col 4.10-11). 'Jason' and 'Sosipater' (16.21b) may be the persons we meet in Ac 17.59 and 20.4.

Paul's secretary, having toiled thus far anonymously to take down the apostle's spectacular flow of thought, peeps for a moment out of hiding. Tertius (16.22) is still capable of giving unsuspecting readers a fright by claiming to have 'written this letter' (NRSV); the NIV softens the impact by translating 'who wrote down this letter', which is, of course, what it means.

Gaius (16.23a), in whose house the local church meets, and who is playing host to Paul himself, sends greetings. It is not clear whether he any of the other persons of this name in the NT; the most likely is the one in 1Co 1.14, a resident of Corinth. If, however, Paul is actually staying at Cenchreae while writing, rather than at Corinth itself,

Gaius might be the host of the church where Phoebe (16.1-2) is a deacon. This might explain why Paul can say he is host to 'all the church', perhaps unlikely in a larger city like Corinth.

There is an Erastus (16.23b) known from an inscription to have held public office in Corinth at the time Paul wrote the letter, and though identification is never certain this may be the same person, conveying his own greetings. Quartus is not heard of anywhere else; like many others before and since, he has simply been a good though obscure Christian. He stands here for the multitudes of whom we know nothing, but who were lights of the world in their several generations.

Rm 16.24 is omitted in the best mss., and it consists simply of the repetition of the closing words of 16.20, with slight variations. Some of the mss. that include it here omit it at 16.20.

### **D. Concluding doxology 16.25-27**

This closing doxology appears in two other places in the letter in some manuscripts, causing other dislocations as it goes. Hardly any copies omit it altogether, though. The real trouble is the content. Those who have seen Romans as basically 'about justification by faith' balk at a summary and doxology that do not mention it. Those who regard Ephesians and Colossians as non-Pauline find material here that reminds them of those letters, and declare that therefore this passage, too, cannot be by Paul.

It is true that Paul does not normally conclude his letters with a doxology like this; but it is also true that Romans is not like the other letters. Nowhere else does Paul conclude an argument with a passage like 11.33-36, but we do not for that reason strike out that magnificent paean of praise. Nowhere else does Paul lay out so formal and careful a central statement of the Christian story as he does in chaps. 5-8, replete with closing christological formulae at the end of every stage of the argument; but nobody doubts that Paul deliberately wrote that extended statement at the center of this letter. What is more, the letter is from one point of view about worship, and designed to evoke worship. It is, uniquely in his writings, a book about God, and one of the running themes is the true response to the true God as opposed to the rejection of this God and the turn to idols (1.5,18-23; 2.17-24; 4.20-22; 5.12-21; 11.33-36; 12.1-2; 15.6,9-13). After a book like this, written by a strongly monotheistic Jew, a doxology is just what we would expect. And Paul is a Jesus-centered monotheist, in the sense explored in 10.9-13; a doxology that remains monotheistic while having Jesus at the middle of it is somehow exactly right.

What is more, Paul did in fact introduce the letter and its major themes with a reference to 'God's gospel concerning God's son', attested by holy Scriptures (1.2) and with the law and the prophets bearing witness to it (3.21). This was, he said at the start, the gospel in which God's righteousness was finally 'unveiled' or 'revealed' (*apokalypsetai*, 1.17) or 'manifested' (*pephanerōtai*, 3.21); so for him to speak, now, of the gospel proclamation as being 'according to the unveiling (*apokalypsis*) of the mystery that is now manifested' echoes his wording at central thematic points, though not in a slavish or obvious way. Above all, the result of the gospel, in a phrase placed by Paul at the center of his key introduction, is 'the obedience of faith among all the nations' (1.5; cf. 15.18).

16.25a. The doxology is framed by the opening five Greek words and the final seven: To the one who is able (powerful) to strengthen you... to whom be glory forever, amen! God's 'power' has been an important theme in the letter (1.16, 20; 4.21; 9.17, 22; 11.23), and Paul declared at the start that his aim in coming to visit the Christians in Rome was so that he might impart some spiritual gift to 'strengthen' them (1.11). He is coming to Rome confident that the God he proclaims is able to do this, through the preaching of 'my' gospel; as in 2.16, this does not mean that Paul has a different gospel from everybody else, but rather that he has been personally entrusted with it. This gospel consists, at its heart, of the proclamation of Jesus the Messiah.<sup>2</sup>

16.25b-26. This gospel proclamation, the announcement of the royal news of King Jesus, is the unveiling of God's long-kept secret. This chimes in with Ep 1.9; 3.3,9 and Col 1.26-27. Paul's own apocalyptic language and its specific meaning (1.16-17; 3.21) is well summed up here. Paul makes the revelation of God's mysteries a main theme in 1Co 2.1,7; 4.1; 13.2; 14.2; and esp. 15.51-52), and he uses the same language at a crucial moment in Romans itself (11.25). This mystery, the long-concealed plan of God, has now been unveiled, and is made known to all the nations through the prophetic writings. Readers of Romans may well think of Isaiah and the rest when they hear the phrase 'prophetic writings'; those who consider this doxology a later addition may well assume that the meaning is the supposedly apostolic writings, coming from early Christian 'prophets'. Perhaps Paul himself could have held these ideas together. His own writings, after all, not least Romans itself, are tightly interwoven with biblical prophecy. The revelation has happened according to the command of the eternal God (see the

similar language in 1.20). Its purpose, as Paul said from the start, was to bring about the obedience of faith.

All this is designed to explain the significance of the gospel proclamation of Jesus the Messiah: when this gospel is announced, it enables people of every nation to see that in Jesus the veil has been drawn back on the eternal plan of the eternal God, and to respond in grateful and obedient loyalty and trust. And it is by this gospel that God is able to strengthen the young church, not least through Paul's ministry as he comes to Rome (1.11).

16.27. There remains a twist in the tail. Paul regularly moves with bewildering ease between the one God, conceived in thoroughly Jewish terms, and Jesus the Messiah, the Lord. In Romans itself we have seen a full incarnational theology, set out in 1.3-4 as a theme, developed in 5.6-11 and 8.3-4 in particular, restated in 9.5, developed again, strikingly, in 10.5-13, and then used afresh in 14.1-12. Paul has celebrated the 'wisdom' of the one true God in 11.33. Now he puts the whole picture together with more regard for underlying theology than Greek grammar, which often comes off worst, after all, in the bustle and verve of his thinking. The NRSV sticks close to the Greek, with its teasing ambiguity: 'To the only wise God, through Jesus the Messiah, to whom be glory forever! Amen'. (The NIV has smoothed this out: 'to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus the Messiah'; similarly, KJV, RSV, NEB, REB, NJB, and a few obviously secondary mss.)

The question is, To whom does the 'to whom' refer? God? Or Jesus the Messiah? We may suspect that Paul's answer would be: Yes. That, of course, is the meaning of 'Amen'.

IC  
NI + KA  
XC

<sup>2</sup> The *kai* (*kai*) cannot here mean 'and' as though the proclamation of Jesus were something other than 'my gospel'; it is either explicative ('namely') or intensive ('even'). See BDAG, 495-96.