

Figure It Out - **ROME in the 50s** - A primer for our first study on June 7th

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The popular phrase from the 1st Century AD was that "**All Roads Lead to Rome**". Julius Caesar was the first Emperor. His great nephew Caesar Augustus ruled at the time of Jesus' birth in 2 BC until he died in 14 AD. He was followed by Tiberius Caesar who ruled until 37 AD. Then came Caligula who ruled only 4 years. Claudius became Caesar in 41 AD. He adopted his 4th wife's son [Domitius Ahenobarbas] in 50 AD, and when he proclaimed this adopted son would be the next Caesar, Claudius was poisoned to death in October of 54, and a 16 year-old took the throne with the title Caesar Nero. He was ruling when Paul wrote to the church in Rome in the late 50s. He committed suicide in 68 AD, but not before he had Peter crucified upside down in 64, and Paul beheaded in 66 or 67 AD.

Paul writes to Rome from Corinth, Achaia [in Greece] around 57 AD – after he completes his third mission trip. He had not been to Rome – in fact **no Apostle had yet visited Rome** – but there was a well-established church body in the Roman capital of one million people, of which between 40,000 and 50,000 were expatriate Jews. He is lodging in Corinth with Aquila and his wife Priscilla. They make tents, which is a trade-skill that Paul also knows. Aquila is an ex-pat Jew from Pontus, a Roman provincial region on the north coast of Asia Minor that borders the south coast of the Black Sea. Five years earlier [in 52 AD], Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome to put an end to their missionary witness among the general population. In Acts chapter-18 Luke records that Aquila and Priscilla had lived in Italy, **in Rome**, and came to Corinth after the decree of Claudius. So there is clearly a Christian church [probably several churches] in Rome as Paul addresses his letter, "To **all the beloved of God in Rome** called to be saints".

If Jesus was crucified on Passover in 32 AD [Nisan 14, April 10th], He then ascended to the Father 40 days later on May 20th. God's Holy Spirit then moved in Jerusalem during Pentecost on May 30th, 50 days after Passover. Luke records in Acts chapter-2 that there were Jews and proselytes in the city for the Feast of Pentecost from: Parthia, Media, Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea, Cappadocia, Pontus [where Aquila was born], and the rest of Asia Minor, as well as Phrygia, Pamphylia, Egypt, and Libyan-Cyrene [remember Simon was conscripted to carry Jesus' cross], the island of Crete, Arabia, **and also Rome!** After listening to Peter's sermon 3,000 people put their faith in Jesus as Messiah and Savior. With more than 15 geographic locations noted by Luke, it averaged 200 people from each of these places, so it is rational to assume that perhaps at least 100 or so Jews and proselytes went back to Rome with the truth of the Gospel and being filled with the Holy Spirit. And it is then logical that a church got started in one or more of the synagogues in Rome sometime in the summer of 32 AD. When Paul is writing to the church in Rome, it has been 25 years since Peter's Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem, so the church [or churches] there in Rome would appear to be firmly established and known around the Mediterranean by the other Christian churches in Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, Ephesus, Smyrna, Colossae, Philadelphia, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Berea, Derbe, Iconium, Lystra, Laodicea, the provincial-regions of Galatia and Macedonia, the well-known church in Syrian-Antioch, and of course the churches in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. There are also churches in Salamis, Paphos, and in between on the island Cyprus. Paul has been to virtually all of these cities, **but not yet to Rome.**

He is writing to a church that is comprised of three groups of people: 1] ex-pat Jews living in Italy either as slaves or free people, maybe some successful businessmen or tradesmen who have purchased Roman citizenship, alongside 2] proselytes who had converted to Judaism and then came to faith in Jesus Christ, and finally 3] Gentiles who are Romans, Hellenist-Greeks, as well as Arabs, North Africans, and other Europeans who chose to live and work in this incredibly cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse capital city. Pay close attention to the nearly 30 individuals in Rome he specifically names in his letter. Paul is well-versed in all things "Roman", having been born a free Roman citizen in Tarsus of Cilicia. He also fully understands being Hebrew, as his father was a Pharisee, and he was also a Pharisee having studied in Jerusalem under the famous rabbi Gamaliel. He has a solid grasp of the intersection of Greco-Roman religion, art, music, poetry, science, and philosophy with Judaism. Socrates wrote to Plato around 404 BC, "*It may be perhaps that a Deity can forgive sins, but I do not see how*". Paul will artfully be used of the Lord to pen what is perhaps the best systematic theology found anywhere in the Bible.

Paul's letter to the church in Rome joins letters to the churches in Galatia and to Paul's fellow Hebrews, where ALL three take on the declaration from Habakkuk 2:4 that "The just shall live by faith", as Paul uses this phrase in his chapter-1 opening [Romans 1:16-17] "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, it is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe, the Jew first and also the Greek, for in that the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written [by the prophet Habakkuk], "The just shall live by faith". One could argue that the Protestant Reformation was inspired by this concept, when from 1513-1516 Professor Martin Luther was lecturing at the newly formed University of Wittenberg on this very same letter from Paul to the Romans, and had the breakthrough in his thoroughly Catholic perspective about how a person is saved from their sins. Based on the letter, it appears the churches in Rome are doing fine, with no doctrinal correction aimed at them. They most likely have *epi-skopos* [in Greek = over-seers, "elders"] in place at the various fellowships spread across the city.

Rome in the 50s functioned with a social class-system based on lineage, wealth, citizenship, and freedom. The official languages were Latin and Greek. Clothing let everyone know your social status. Only Caesar could wear "royal" purple. Senators wore white togas with only a line of purple trim. Upwards of 40% of Rome were slaves [the *plebeians*] who served the upper classes [the *patroni*] of rulers, politicians, those with high military rank, and wealthy citizens, businessmen, and property owners. Today in our 21st Century western culture we still speak of "patrons" [upper-level individuals who fund the arts], while Ivy League universities and military academies refer to the entry-level class as "plebes". The wealthy lived and ate well in beautiful homes waited on by many slaves. The middle class tended shops, the ports, and markets. Military leaders lived as *patroni*, while the typical Roman cavalryman and foot-soldier were quartered in crowded barracks. The Colosseum [from the word "Colossus" meaning massive] would not be built for another 15 years [by Vespasian], but the Forum [built by Augustus in 29 BC] was busy every day with political speeches, election voting, trials for criminals, and gladiator games.

At this time, people traded and traveled in relative safety all thru the Mediterranean basin – on well-constructed roads and by well-mapped shipping routes among over 150 seaports – from the Iberian Peninsula over to and across North Africa to Alexandria, Egypt and into the edge of the Arabian Peninsula, north along the Assyrian-Parthian border into all Asia Minor [modern day Turkey], and around the Black Sea into Europe and what is now France and Britain. It was quite the perfect time for the Gospel of Jesus Christ to spread from Jerusalem across the Empire. It is in this setting that we will study Paul's letter to the overall church body that is in Rome in the 50s.

