

Romans 1

Paul and the Gospel of God

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(Sample)

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Introduction

Rhetoric

What is rhetoric?

The Lexham Bible Dictionary introduces 'Rhetoric' as, *'The art of composing an oral or written presentation by using style, argumentation, and arrangement of language to persuade an audience to a particular inclination... In present-day English, the word "rhetoric" often carries the negative connotation of empty words, biased agendas, and propaganda. In the Graeco-Roman world, however, where the oral word carried great authority, rhetoric was a respected and honoured ability that public speakers cultivated and audiences cherished.'*

This book introduces a refreshed interpretation of the rhetoric in the introduction of the letter...

Author

The letter to the Romans is from *Paul*.

For an introduction to Paul in his ancient context, see for example N.T. Wright's popular book, *Paul: A Biography* (2018).

Paul (Saul) had been a Pharisee.

As a Pharisee he had been a '*separated one*'.

(See the [Discussion](#) of [Paul](#) below.)

As Though Agrippa

In the letter, Paul *alludes* to the Roman historical figure Marcus Agrippa during a corresponding occasion in Roman history.

Roman Context

See the [Roman Context and Story](#) section below for information on [Marcus Agrippa](#).

The Corresponding Occasion

Paul is as though Agrippa *following* The Battle of Actium and *before* Octavian's triumph in Rome.

On the 2nd September, 31 B.C., Julius Caesar's adopted heir Octavian confronted Antony and Cleopatra in the Battle of Actium. The naval battle represented the climax of more than a decade of escalating tensions and propaganda, in which Octavian was depicted as the defender of Roman tradition and values, and Mark Antony as having been bewitched by the Egyptian Queen and her strange gods. Agrippa was the naval commander in the foundational victory for Octavian.

Octavian's triumph was not until August, 29.B.C..

Roman Context

See [A Contextual Understanding of Apostleship](#), noting that the ancient word 'apostle' could denote the commander of a naval fleet.

Tensions in Italy

Despite the outcome of the battle there were tensions in Italy.

The tensions included [The Financial Indebtedness](#) to the veteran troops.

Following the battle, Agrippa had been sent to Italy to deal with the tensions.

Paul writes as though Agrippa having *already* been in Italy to deal with the tensions, having not taken the road to capital, and having since departed.

His probable location is Cenchreae (Corinth), a major Greek port.

Main Interpretation

1:1-7 — The Salutation

Paul introduces himself as though Marcus Agrippa.

As he summarises the gospel, he:

- calls to mind king David's adulterous affair (of 2 Sam 11); and
- seems to boast about *his* having personally installed Jesus Christ into power!

Then with prompt word of apostleship and with Rome within the scope of apostleship, he addresses Rome—

'... grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

(See also [The Corresponding Occasion](#), above.)

1:1a

Paul the servant of Christ Jesus

Paul introduces himself as the servant of the Christ (Messiah), Jesus.

Roman Context

[Marcus Agrippa](#) was the [Right-Hand Man](#) of Octavian.

Notes

The opening words could also have been heard as: *'A small Roman slave of the Messiah, Jesus.'* (See the [Additional Notes, A slave.](#))

Roman Context and Story

*Note: Text or blocks with a light blue background, such as **this example**, were generated by Grok, an AI developed by xAI.*

This is an example of a Grok-generated block.

A Contextual Understanding of Apostleship

The Ancient Word

The ancient Greek word “ἀπόστολος” (apostolos), translated as “apostle”, could denote the commander of a naval fleet.

Consider for instance:

- The Liddell & Scott lexicon has “ἀπόστολος” as equivalent to “στόλος, a fleet ready for sea, a naval squadron or expedition”.¹
- J.B. Lightfoot writes, “The word ἀπόστολος in the first instance is an adjective signifying ‘despatched’ or ‘sent forth...’” He continues, “... Its special sense denoting ‘a naval expedition, a fleet despatched on foreign service,’ seems to have entirely superseded every other meaning in the Attic dialect; and in the classical Greek of a later period also, except in this sense, the word appears to be of very rare occurrence.”²
- The Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich (BDAG) lexicon reveals that the Greek term “ἀπόστολος” initially denoted a naval expedition or potentially the commander of such in classical Greek literature, as evidenced by its use by Lysias in the 5th-4th century BC and Demosthenes in the 4th century BC. This maritime context persists in later periods, with references by Posidonius in the 2nd-1st century BC and Strabo around the turn of the era, indicating that the seafaring or expeditionary sense of “ἀπόστολος” was well-established and continued to be relevant well into the 1st century AD.³
- The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT) further corroborates the maritime roots of “ἀπόστολος,” highlighting its initial role as an adjective linked to ships prepared for voyage, as noted by Plato. Over time, “ἀπόστολος” not only signified the vessel or fleet itself but also extended to describe military expeditions and the leaders of these naval ventures, like admirals, illustrating its integral connection to ancient Greek naval terminology.⁴

A Meaning Forefront to Romans 1

Granted Paul’s allusion to Marcus Agrippa (see the [Discussion](#) on [The Poetic Sequence](#) below), then the ancient Greek naval sense of “apostle” and “apostleship” is *forefront* to the introduction of the letter to the Romans.

And since Agrippa had epitomised the “apostle” identity and role in the public sphere as *the* Roman “apostle”, then Agrippa’s example as “apostle” is forefront to the introduction of the letter.

¹Per the second definition in Liddell and Scott (*A Greek-English lexicon*, p. 200). See also the detail on “στόλος” (stolos). (*ibid.*, p. 1433)

²Lightfoot (*St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians: A revised text with introduction, notes, and dissertations*. The name and office of an Apostle). For the complete opening paragraph, see the [Additional Notes](#).

³Per Arndt et al. (*BDAG*, p. 122) “ἀπόστολος, ου, ὁ (s. ἀποστέλλω). In older Gk. (Lysias, Demosth.) and later (e.g. Posidon.: 87 Fgm. 53 p. 257, 21 Jac. [Strabo 3, 5, 5]) ὁ ἀ. is a naval expedition, prob. also its commander (Anecd. Gr. 217, 26).”

⁴See Kittel and Friedrich, *TDNT*, Vol. I, 407.

Marcus Agrippa

Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa stands as one of the most pivotal figures in the transformation of Rome from a republic to an empire, a man whose contributions to the rise of Augustus and the stability of the Roman state were both profound and enduring. Born in 63 BCE, Agrippa emerged from modest origins to become the indispensable ally of Octavian, later known as Augustus, Rome's first emperor. His life, as detailed in F.A. Wright's *Marcus Agrippa: Organizer of Victory*, exemplifies a rare blend of military prowess, administrative genius, and unwavering loyalty, qualities that cemented his legacy as a cornerstone of the Augustan era. While Octavian's name dominates the narrative of Rome's imperial founding, Agrippa's role as the architect of many of its successes—military, political, and cultural—cannot be overstated. His ability to operate effectively behind the scenes, coupled with his public prominence, made him a unique figure in Roman history, embodying the practical and strategic underpinnings of the new imperial order.

Agrippa's significance lies not only in his achievements but also in his embodiment of the Roman virtues of discipline, duty, and pragmatism. Unlike many of his contemporaries, whose ambitions often led to rivalry and betrayal, Agrippa remained steadfastly loyal to Octavian, serving as his trusted lieutenant through the turbulent years of civil war and the consolidation of power that followed. His contributions spanned multiple domains: as a general, he secured critical victories, most notably at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, which decisively shifted the balance of power in Octavian's favor; as an administrator, he reshaped Rome's urban landscape with monumental building projects like the Pantheon and the Aqua Virgo; and as a diplomat, he helped stabilize the empire's provinces through strategic governance. Wright emphasizes Agrippa's organizational genius, portraying him as a man who preferred results to personal glory, a trait that set him apart in an era of self-aggrandizement.

Yet Agrippa's story is not merely one of service to Octavian. His rise from a relatively obscure background to a position of immense influence reflects the fluidity of Roman society during the late Republic, where talent and loyalty could elevate even those outside the traditional aristocracy. His marriage to Julia, Augustus' daughter, and his role as a potential successor underscored his integration into the imperial family, even as he maintained a public image of humility. Agrippa's life thus offers a lens through which to view the broader dynamics of power, loyalty, and innovation in the Augustan age. As we explore his early years, military campaigns, and lasting legacy, Agrippa emerges not only as Octavian's right-hand man but as a figure whose vision and labor helped forge the foundations of imperial Rome.

Right-Hand Man

(Pending.)

A Roman Story of Apostleship

The Financial Indebtedness

(Pending.)

Discussion

Paul

The letter to the Romans is from *Paul*. Whereas Paul writes *As Though Agrippa*, the letter is from Paul, of course.

Concerning ‘Pauline’ authorship:

- Cranfield writes for instance, ‘*Today no responsible criticism disputes its Pauline origin.*’¹
- Moo writes, ‘*Romans claims to be written by Paul (1:1), and there has been no serious challenge to this claim.*’²

For an introduction then to Paul in his ancient context, see for example, N.T. Wright’s popular book, *Paul: A Biography* (2018).³

A Pharisee

Paul (Saul)⁴ had been a Pharisee⁵. For instance, in Phil 3:4b-6 he writes, ‘*If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*’ (ESV) See also Acts 23:6; Acts 26:4-5; Gal 1:13-14.

As a Pharisee he had been a ‘*separated one*’. (‘*The Semitic words mean ‘the separated ones, separatists*’.⁶) In practice, the Torah-works of sabbath, circumcision and food laws *separated* the Jewish people from their pagan neighbours.⁷

¹Cranfield, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 2.

²Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*, p. 1.

³Wright, *Paul: a biography*.

⁴Paul, who was also called Saul, is referred to as Paul from Acts 13.

⁵Per the glossary of N.T. Wright’s ‘for Everyone’ series, ‘*The Pharisees were an unofficial but powerful Jewish pressure group through most of the first centuries BC and AD...*’. See e.g., Wright (*Hebrews for everyone*). For further information from Wright consider his *Christian Origins and the Question of God* series beginning with Wright (*The New Testament and the People of God*).

⁶Per Φαρισαῖος (Pharisaios) in Arndt et al. (*BDAG*, p. 1049).

⁷See for example, *The Theology of a Pharisee* in Wright (*Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, pp. 179–193)

The Poetic Sequence

Let the “poetic sequence” refer to *the flow of thought in the text itself*, or *the order of things as they appear in the text itself*.¹

The “poetic sequence” of the introduction of the letter features Paul as though Marcus Agrippa writing to the Romans. [The Corresponding Occasion](#) is *following* The Battle of Actium and *before* Octavian’s triumph in Rome. So Paul is in character as though Agrippa at a particular moment in ancient Roman history,² and this first sweeping *allusion*³ informs the surface meaning of the text.

¹On the term “poetic sequence”, see for instance Wright (*The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 403–04), referencing Norman Peterson’s work. Or, see the multiple references in Wright (*Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978–2013*), for example “*In what follows I shall regularly distinguish between the actual argument of the letter, which has its own rhetorical force, and the wider worldview and belief system on which Paul draws. I shall refer to these two hypothetical entities, in Norman Petersen’s terms, as the ‘poetic sequence’ and the ‘narrative sequence’ respectively*” (pp. 94–95).

²As set within the “narrative sequence” of Rome and her gods.

³See for instance Beetham (“[Quotation, Allusion, and Echo](#)”) on ‘Allusion’. This book presents the case that Paul, with *sufficient explicitness*, *intends* the allusion to the *single identifiable source* of Roman history, creating an *essential interpretive link*.

Additional Notes

Main Interpretation Notes

1:1 — A slave

- The Greek word δοῦλος *doulos* (translated the servant) can also be translated, a slave.
- Since the Latin surname or ‘cognomen’ Paul meant ‘small’ or humble, the opening words could also have been heard as: ‘A small Roman slave of the Messiah, Jesus.’
- Cranfield notes, ‘For the Greek in the classical tradition it was well-nigh impossible to use a word of the δοῦλος group without some feeling of abhorrence.’¹
- In the Old Testament, the phrase, ‘the servant of the Lord’, is honourable. ‘The expression *‘ebed* YHWH, δοῦλος κυρίου, or an equivalent, is a title of honour accorded to Moses, Joshua, David and the prophets (e.g. Josh 14:7; 24:29; Judg 2:8; 2 Kgs 17:23; Ps 89:3).’²

¹See Cranfield, *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 50.

²*Ibid.*, p. 50.

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