

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."*

(See the [Discussion](#) on Classical Rhetoric.)

Author

The letter to the Romans is from [Paul](#).

Paul (Saul) had been a Pharisee. (See [A Pharisee](#).)

As a Pharisee he had been a "separated one".

(See also the [Discussion](#) on [Paul](#).)

Location

Assume that Paul writes from the region of Greece during his "third missionary journey".

His circumstances correspond with Acts 20:2-3 (ESV): *"When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. There he spent three months, and when a plot was made against him by the Jews as he was about to set sail for Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia."*

Assume that Paul writes from Greece, possibly Corinth (Cenchreae), during this three-month period.

(See also the [Discussion](#) on Paul's Location and Mission.)

As Though Agrippa

In the introduction of the letter, Paul echoes the Roman historical figure [Marcus Agrippa](#).

Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa (c. 63 B.C.-12 B.C.) was a military commander, naval commander and lifelong friend of Octavian.

Paul alludes to The Roman "Apostle" during a corresponding occasion in ancient history.

(See also the [Roman Context and Story](#) section, [A Contextual Understanding of Apostleship, The Ancient Word "Apostle"](#).)

The Corresponding Occasion

Paul is as though Marcus Agrippa *after* The Battle of Actium and *before* Octavian's Triple Triumph in Rome.

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

It would be almost two years before Octavian's Triple Triumph in mid-August 29 B.C.

(See also the [Roman Context and Story](#), A Roman Story of Apostleship below.)

Tensions in Italy

Despite the outcome of the battle there were ongoing tensions in Italy. (See also Rome, the Contested Dynamic below.)

These tensions were heightened by the situation of returning veterans gathered at Brundisium.

The veterans demanded demobilisation—and land.

Sent to Italy

Soon after Actium, Octavian sent Agrippa to Italy to deal with the tensions. (Octavian himself soon arrived but proceeded no further than Brundisium.)

Paul writes as though Agrippa, having already been sent to Italy and then departed.

His [Location](#) is Greece, possibly the eastern port of Corinth (Cenchreae).

The Corresponding Audience

For the moment, the reader may wish to entertain a corresponding audience—that Paul, as though Agrippa, is writing to *all* in Rome.

The ongoing tensions had concerned the troops, the elite, and the Roman populace.

Main Interpretation

1:1-7 — The Salutation

Overview

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 with—

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

Roman Context Overview

[The Corresponding Occasion](#) for the letter is after the Battle of Actium, and before Octavian's triple triumph in Rome.

Despite the outcome of the battle there were [Tensions in Italy](#). Paul writes [As Though Agrippa](#) having already been sent to Italy and then departed.

His [Location](#) is Greece, possibly the eastern port of Corinth (Cenchreae).

(See the [Introduction](#) above.)

1:1a

Paul the servant of Christ Jesus,

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

Notes

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

1:1b

the called apostle having been set apart for the gospel of God,

Paul introduces himself further.

Historically, Marcus Agrippa was *the* Roman "apostle". (See the [Roman Context](#) below.)

[As though Agrippa](#), the called apostle would evoke Graeco-Roman notions of divine favour, fate or appointment by a higher authority.

As Octavian's deputy, Agrippa could furthermore have described himself as [having been set apart](#)—in the sense of distinguished—culminating in his wearing the naval crown in the Battle of Actium. As the naval "apostle" in the famed battle, Marcus Agrippa had featured within the gospel of Rome. Agrippa was, in a literal sense, [into](#)—personally featured within the content of—the [gospel](#) of ancient Rome.

Except, Paul is presently referring to [the gospel of God](#). (See the [Discussion](#) below)

Roman Context

In [The Corresponding Occasion](#), Marcus Agrippa was *the* Roman "Apostle.

(See also [A Contextual Understanding of Apostleship, The Ancient Word "Apostle"](#).)

Octavian had already "*summoned*" (or [called](#)) Agrippa to Italy. (See the [Introduction](#) to the [Corresponding Occasion](#), above.)

The opening clause then suggests more about the tense historical situation. Octavian may have then furthermore "*separated*" Agrippa:

- "*because of*" opposition to "*the gospel*" (opposition that may have "*excluded*" both Octavian and Agrippa), and also
- "*for*" the ongoing labour of "*the gospel*" in the eastern Mediterranean.

(See also [A Contextual Understanding of Apostleship](#), Agrippa's "Apostleship" Following Actium.)

Discussion

The opening clause also functions as a riddle. (See the [Discussion](#) on Paul's [Having Been Separated](#), below.)

Roman Context and Story

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.

A Contextual Understanding of Apostleship

The Ancient Word "Apostle"

The ancient Greek word "ἀπόστολος" (apostolos), translated "apostle", could denote a fleet and the commander of the 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

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 Appendix, Extended Citations below.

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.

Discussion

Paul

The letter to the Romans is from Paul.

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

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

A Separated One

Before he encountered Jesus Christ on the Road to Damascus,⁴ Paul (Saul)⁵ had had a self-identity as "a separated one". The Jewish self-identity was of having been *separated* by God:

- separated from uncleanness, including from the unclean nations and their idolatries;
- as God's own possession—as the people of God;
- to be holy as God is holy.

Per the concise Lev 20:26: "*You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.*" (ESV)

Separated, and to be a *blessing* to the nations.⁶

A Pharisee

Paul (Saul) had furthermore been a Pharisee.⁷

As a Pharisee ("*The Semitic words mean 'the separated ones, separatists'*"⁸), he had been a "separated one" among the separated ones, so to speak. And, he was a particularly *zealous* Pharisee.

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

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

³Wright (*Paul: a biography*). This book includes consideration of Paul's mindset when he persecuted the church.

⁴See Acts 7-9:6.

⁵Paul, who was also called Saul, is referred to as Paul from Acts 13.

⁶See A Blessing to All the Nations, ahead.

⁷See for example his own words in Acts 23:6; Acts 26:4-5; Gal 1:13-14.

⁸Per Φαρισαῖος (Pharisaios) in Arndt et al. (*BDAG*, p. 1049).

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)

And so Paul (Saul) had had a self-identity as "a separated one", as he persecuted the Jewish plus Greek Christian church.¹

Having Been Separated

The rhetorical sense of 1:1b, of Paul [As Though Agrippa's](#) "*having been set apart*" (or "*having been separated*"), is *distinguished*. (See 1:1b)

Yet the same clause also supports a negative sense of Paul's "*having been excluded*" from the people of God.²

The continuing and immediate claim then to be within the content of the gospel of *god*, a riddle.

¹There were Christian Greeks (Hellenists) in Acts 6.

²This sense is ambiguous. See next, The Momentary Refrain.

The Poetic Sequence

Let the term "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

¹On the terms "poetic sequence", "referential sequence" and "narrative sequence", see for instance Wright (*The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 403-04) and Wright (*Pauline Perspectives: Essays on Paul, 1978-2013*, pp. 94-95), referencing Norman Peterson's work.

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