

1. LET'S COMPARE THE PAIR — PAUL AND JESUS! (Romans 1:1-7)

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PAUL, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God, which He promised before through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead ... (Romans 1:1-4 NKJV).

If you wished to write a letter during the days of the Roman Empire when Jesus and the apostles lived, you would have faced not a few hurdles. Letter-writing those millennia ago was a relatively expensive and challenging undertaking.

You would not have had ready access to the quality and amount of ink and paper that we do (definitely no keyboards!) and there were no post boxes or any of the many express postal services we take for granted. So, how would you do it?

Despite all of the various challenges, many thousands of letters from that period have been discovered by archaeologists. The typical letter would usually range from just 20 to 200 words.

Longer letters were rare. Cicero's longest letter was 2,500 words, and Seneca's 4,000-word letter was an all-time record. Paul's average letter was 1,300 words, but his longest letter to the Romans was over 7,000 words. Indeed, it is the longest letter we have from that ancient world! (¹)

In this article I wish to briefly examine Paul's introduction to his mammoth letter to the Christians in Rome. In the Greek text it's a single sentence of roughly *ninety-three words* (depending on which textual variant we use) going all the way down to the end of **verse seven** in our Bibles.

What could go wrong??? Well, the apostle would not have anticipated the sharp debate which his introduction has since generated. Discussion has historically focused around **verses 3-4** which concerns the credentials necessary for Jesus Christ to qualify as God's promised Messianic Son. Did Paul introduce a Jesus with "two natures" — i.e., composed of a human nature **according to the flesh** and an eternal Divine nature **according to the Spirit**?

We shall leave that discussion to our next article. This article will focus on comparing Paul and Jesus. Get ready for a few surprises! And once we have looked at this aspect we will be in a better place to unpack the debate surrounding the hotly contested **verses 3-4**.

¹ Pawson, David, *Unlocking The Bible: A Unique Overview of the Whole Bible*, Collins, London (2015 edition) p.1011

A). PAUL A SLAVE / SERVANT

Paul begins his *magnum opus* by giving his own credentials to a church he did not found and had not yet visited. First, he calls himself a **slave/servant of Christ Jesus**. In the Roman Empire there were slave-owners, or lords and masters, who quite literally controlled every aspect of their slaves' lives — even the right of punishment unto death for misdemeanor, and particularly for disloyalty. (²)

By calling himself Christ's **slave/servant** Paul certainly meant that he was no longer the boss of his own destiny. He knew that Christ Jesus had redeemed him by the blood of the New Covenant shed at Calvary. So yes, Paul felt keenly the price of his own salvation and wanted to live his life for his redeemer out of a sense of loving debt. (³)

However, I think there is surely another element in his thinking here. William Barclay rightly highlights how, In the Old Testament, “**slave**” is the regular word which describes the great men of God. Moses was the servant, the slave of the LORD (Joshua 1:2). Joshua too was the slave of God (Josh 24:9). {I would add that King David delighted in calling himself the Servant of Yahweh as in 2 Sam 7.} The proudest title of the prophets, the title which distinguishes them from other men, is that they are the servants and the slaves of God (Amos 3:7; Jer 3:25). (⁴)

So, when Paul calls himself a **slave of Christ Jesus** it's very possible he was claiming to stand in the succession of all the servants of God before him who were under compulsion to deliver God's word. For Paul then, to be the **slave of Christ Jesus** was both a title of loving devotion to his Lord and Master Jesus Christ and a high claim to being a loyal servant in the line of all the true prophets and servants of God.

JESUS THE SLAVE

Now ask yourself whether Jesus also considered himself to be a humble slave or servant of his LORD and God? The answer is surely, YES! This fact ought to be so self-evident that it hardly needs elaboration, yet I am sure my question will have raised a few eyebrows.

God Himself designated His Son Jesus as **My servant whom I have chosen (Matt 12: 18)**. This certainly fulfilled Isaiah's famous “**Suffering Servant**” prophecy from **Isaiah chapters 49-53**, for it identified Jesus of Nazareth as the ultimate fulfillment of that prophetic word concerning the future Servant-Messiah of Yahweh God.

² It is estimated that as many as 20% of the population of 50 million in the Empire were slaves. Some historians go as high as 30% for Italy. Conservatively then, we may estimate there were about 10 million slaves at the time.

³ In the OT slaves who loved their owners and wished to serve them for life could opt to have their ears bored through with an awl as a permanent mark of their loving commitment to their owners (Ex 21:6; Deut 15:17). Paul wrote to the Corinthians that they were **bought with a price** so were **not their own** but belonged to their Redeemer.

⁴ **The Letter To The Romans: The Daily Study Bible**, Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, (Sixth impression 1966) p2

Philippians 2: 7-8 states that Christ Jesus took the form of a servant ... and humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. The whole of Jesus' life was dedicated to humble and obedient service, first to God, then to man. He constantly stated he only did what he saw his Father doing and only spoke what his Father authorised.

On the night of his betrayal, at The Last Supper, the Lord Jesus laid aside his garments, girded himself with a towel ... poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet ... (John 13: 1ff). Only slaves tied a towel around themselves to wash feet — the servant of God and of man *par excellence*!

After the Day of Pentecost the apostle Peter testified that, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has glorified His Servant Jesus ... (Acts 3:13).

Like the apostle Paul, Jesus' greatest joy was to please his Father by His faithful, unquestioning, obedience. Also, like the apostle, our Lord considered that he stood in the succession of the true prophets of Israel ... with the distinction that he stood as the Son and heir of the Father's entire kingdom and household (see Heb 3:1-6)!

B). AN APOSTLE

Paul adds that he is an apostle. The verb ἀποστέλλω / apostellō means to send out, to delegate, to commission. Paul never lost the wonder that God had chosen him to be an agent, a messenger, who had been mightily laid hold of for the grandest work of all — to proclaim the Gospel of God to the world, to the Jew first and to the Gentile.

JESUS THE APOSTLE

Ask yourself, whether Jesus considered himself an apostle? Again, to ask this is to answer it in the affirmative. The driving motive of his whole life and ministry was to proclaim the gospel of God's kingdom ... "I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent" (Lk 4:43). That is Jesus' Mission Statement, his purpose-statement, the reason why God sent him. Indeed, *Jesus is the first one to preach the gospel of our salvation* (Heb. 2:3)!

Every parable Jesus taught concerned the good news about the kingdom of God. The message Jesus proclaimed was the gospel-word his Father commissioned him to preach. No wonder we are invited to also share in the heavenly calling by considering Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession [who] was faithful to the One Who appointed him ... (Heb 3:1-2).

So, Jesus had been authorised by his Father to proclaim the Gospel of God, and as the Son of God he had also been given authority to appoint other apostles, such as Paul. Jesus said, As the Father has sent me, so I send you (John 17:18; 20:21).

C). CHOSEN

Notice how Paul puts an adjective in front of the word **apostle** as he seeks to pile up one after another the enormous privileges he believes he has received. He describes himself as **called** (**called an apostle**). This has the root meaning of being chosen (like those in Jesus' parable who were chosen, invited, summoned, to the king's banquet). He knows he had been selected by special invitation to his life's mission and calling. No man arrogates this calling to be an apostle unto himself.

JESUS IS THE CHOSEN ONE

No different to Jesus. Indeed, the prophetic Scriptures call Jesus **the Elect one in whom My soul delights** (Isaiah 42:1)! And it's repeated in **Isaiah 49** where we are told that the LORD God **has chosen (elected)** His redeemer. **Matthew** says that Yahweh's election of Jesus as the Servant-Messiah was the historical fulfillment of these Scriptures (see **Matt 12:15-18**).

Peter says that we come **to him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious** (1 Pet 2:4). Peter then elaborates by quoting **Isaiah 28:16**, Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner-stone, **elect and precious** ...

We observe that God's election is first of Christ Jesus, then those of us who believe in him also become God's elect in him. What joy to read that **the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love ...**(Eph 1: 3-4)! Repeat: Christ is **the Elect one** and Paul knew that he, and all believers, were chosen in him.

D). SEPARATED.

Paul's next qualification for his divine calling is critically important. He adds that he has been **"separated unto the Gospel of God"** (v.1). So you ask, why did he add the extra idea that he had been **"separated"** to proclaim the Gospel of God? Aren't the concepts of being a slave and a chosen apostle sufficient?

Great question! The answer is that this word **"separated"** adds a rich nuance beyond what he has already iterated. (⁵) Its primary meaning is **"to mark off by setting a boundary"**. You may be able to recognise the English word "horizon" in it ... **horizō**. The horizon sets the limits of our vision. This idea leads to some secondary nuances such as to sever, to limit, to determine, to appoint, to declare, and similar ideas. It can also carry the negative notion of being excluded as disreputable or as unworthy.

⁵ Ἀφορίζω / *aphorizō*. In **Romans 1:1** this is a perfect passive participle meaning **"having been set apart"** ... ἀφωρισμένος.

Some commentators speculate that the apostle is engaging in a word play here. “Separated” is the Greek for the Hebrew word “Pharisee”. Previously Paul had been a Pharisee *separated from* Gentiles, but by God’s grace he is now *separated to* the Gentiles **for the gospel of God!** He never lost sight of the fact that his apostleship and calling did not come from men, but by the grace of the God of heaven.

Indeed, looking back over his life, Paul was able to say that **it pleased God Who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace** (Gal 1:15). Paul would have sung with gusto that modern chorus, **All my life You have been so, so good. Your goodness is running after, it’s running after me!**

JESUS HAS BEEN SEPARATED TOO!

If you only read your English Bible you will in all likelihood miss this critical piece of the apostle’s introduction in **Romans 1:4**.

Most translations will correctly say that Paul claims the qualification to write and do what he does because he has been “separated” for his mission. However, most translators take the same word (when it is applied to Christ down in **verse 4**) and make it read something like how Jesus **was declared to be the Son of God with power ...** I think that consistency would firstly mean that Jesus **was separated / marked out to be the Son of God with power ...**

“Declared” is of course perfectly legitimate, but it is not the primary or root meaning of this verb. If we stick to the primary use of this word (as already universally translated in Paul’s introduction in **verse 1**) we arrive at another significant comparison between Paul and Jesus Christ. Both men have the special credential of having been separated by God for their respective ministries from the beginning of their lives from birth.

If you took the time earlier to read the two passages about Yahweh’s chosen Servant from **Isaiah** you will have picked up a critical piece of information. God’s election of His Servant-Messiah was from his mother’s womb ...

The LORD has called me from the womb; from the matrix of my mother he has made mention of my name ... And now the LORD says, Who formed me from the womb to be His servant ... (Is. 49: 1, 5). (More on this in the next article.)

DRAWING IT ALL TOGETHER SO FAR

The long introduction to the **Letter to the Romans** is all about **the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the holy Scriptures** (vs. 1-2).

What most readers and commentators appear to miss, is that two of Yahweh’s key men in the great drama of the ages — Paul & Jesus — are compared in exactly the

same terms. Both men were slaves or servants of God Himself. Both men were apostles, sent and authorised by the God of Israel. Both men were called, elected, chosen, by the God of heaven. Both men were separated from their mother's wombs for a unique calling and ministry.

Now, I imagine, some of my readers may be resisting my comparison. Those who have been taught that Jesus is "more than a mere man" will object to my putting our Lord Jesus Christ alongside the man Paul ... as if I am suggesting that equivalent descriptions mean the two men are equal in status in every way. Not so fast!

I will be told that Jesus is both "fully God and fully man" and that this cannot be said of Paul. If I had set out to compare, say, Paul and Peter, the same things could have been said and not an eyebrow would have been raised. Everybody takes it for granted that Paul & Peter are two human beings. But because we are comparing Paul and Jesus from the introduction to **Romans**, some will be uncomfortable.

After all, official trinitarian doctrine says Jesus Christ was incarnated as man (N.B. not as a man!). According to his flesh nature Jesus is (hu)man **and** at the same time, he is the Son of God according to his "divine nature"! Jesus reputedly has "two natures"!

They think they find this in **verses 3-4 ... who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead ...** But is this really an affirmation that we are to believe in Christ's "full Deity" and "full humanity"? Is Jesus the "God-man" having two distinct natures in his "one person" as is popularly believed?

The **NIV** translates it to read that **the Son of God as to his human nature was a descendant of David ...** The **Amplified** Bible also reads, that God's Son **as to the flesh (His human nature) was born a descendant of David ...**

This is indeed a most subtle interpretive suggestion. And it's not in the text (as we shall see next time). Meantime, sufficient to say that I know of no human being who does not have a human nature! Therefore the **NIV** and the **AMP** are redundant!

So, when we compare the credentials of Paul and Jesus we find a perfect congruence between two men, two human beings.

That said, we do not question for one moment that, great as Paul was as to his calling in God's gospel, our Lord Jesus holds the preeminent place in all things. As David's greater son Jesus has been exalted to a position which no other human being has yet attained to. So stay tuned for the next instalment in **The Great Debate!**