Introduction

Purpose and Overview

The purpose of this paper is to arrive at a reasonable and coherent understanding of the meaning of Romans 1:18-20. This study of Scripture will take place through the exegesis of the aforementioned passage. An exegesis is a process that consists of deriving meaning from or drawing the meaning out of a given passage in Scripture by comparing perceptions from two different groups of people at separate periods of time: the time of the inspired author as well as the time of the modern reader. We will explore what the passage meant for the original audience in its historical context and discover what the text means to the readers of today. While the book of Romans was originally written to a select group of people in earlier times, exegesis extends the message beyond a limited few to every person in the world in any generation.

That the apostle Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans is not a matter of serious dispute. However, some scholars suggest that chapter 16 may not have been part of the original epistles sent to Rome but, rather, a separate letter sent to Ephesus. It is evident through the references to Gaius, Erastus and Phoebe (1 Corinthians 1:14, 2 Timothy 4:20 and Romans 16:1 respectively) that Paul wrote the epistle to the Romans during his three-month stay in the city of Corinth during his Third Missionary Journey. Scholars date this visit the winter of A.D. 57-8, but others prefer an earlier date. After delivering the contributions to the poor among the Christians in Jerusalem, Paul intended to visit Rome to see the Christian church in the capital city of the Roman Empire. It was with desires to

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introduce Christianity into Spain that Paul wrote this epistle in order to secure the blessings and assistance of the believers in Rome.\(^3\)

**Sources and Methodology**

In order to derive meaning from the select passage in the epistle to the Romans, a multiple of sources will be used. Because I am not well-versed in Greek, the original meanings for the Greek words will not be included. Sources include various translations of Scripture, a number of concordances, a study guide on the book of Romans, interpretations by scholars and commentaries which includes the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary and other materials. Comparison of different translations of Scripture will assist in deduction or reiteration of keywords and phrases. The understanding of these keywords or phrases through exploration of their definition will give greater depth to the passage which will help readers understand the original meaning intended along with the timeless message for today.

The wrath of God. and from heaven.

The wrath of God as referred to in the King James Version (KJV) and New International version (NIV) is being revealed from heaven (NIV). The New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) refers to the wrath of God as the retribution of God while the New Living Translations (NLT) condenses the phrase into the single, emotion-charged word anger. However, the wrath of God is not to be confused with human emotion. “God is love” (1 John 4:8, NIV). This firmly establishes that God does not hate the sinner but, rather, the ultimate Lover hates sin. Therefore, the wrath of God is best described as the divine displeasure or reaction against sin which leads to the disconnect from the life-giving power. The wrath of God counteracts sin which leads to death. It is not an emotion driven response towards the sinner but a definite reaction to sin.

“The revelation of divine wrath comes as a message of warning from [the throne of God or heaven].” It is significant that God reveals Himself to His creations on earth.

Revealed.

The word revealed is a keyword in this section. The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary likens the word to manifestation. “The full manifestation of the wrath of God will be seen at the end of the world.” However, this is not the end in itself. Righteousness will also manifest at the last judgment. Sin leads to death; righteousness

brings eternal salvation. Barrett reasons “if the revelation of wrath can be demonstrated . . .
the revelation of righteousness is demonstrated [as well].” The wrath of God reveals the
righteousness of God.

*Ungodliness. and unrighteousness.*

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven **against all ungodliness and**

unrighteousness of men (KJV) or godlessness and wickedness (NIV), ungodliness and

injustice of human beings (NJB) and sinful, wicked people (NLT). Three of the four

translations offer word pairings in depiction of those who receive the wrath of God. The

most similar attribute for the men who are the objects of the wrath of God are defined in a

single word: ungodliness (which leads to unrighteousness with people). Johnson states

“[m]an’s moral condition of unrighteousness is never separated from religious corruption

and is seen by Paul as a result of man’s religious apostasy.” This is plausible. However,

Johnson furthers the thought with the notion that ungodliness and unrighteousness are

“emphatic expression of one and the same thing.” His conclusion obliterates the need for

two separate words.

The disregard for the use of two separate words is opposite of what Newell offers:

“ungodliness is direct disregard of God . . . while unrighteousness has reference to

wickedness of conduct, in itself and toward other men.” Newell conveys that there is a

clear distinction in definition between the two words. The distinction is in harmony with

the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary which defines ungodliness and

unrighteousness as “lack of reverence for God” and “lack of right conduct” respectively.

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The concepts of healthy relationships—a vertical relationship with God and horizontal relationships with fellow human beings—emerges in the very definition of the two words which demonstrates the need for both.

This distinction is taken a step in an alternative direction when Johnson states that Romans 1:18-32 demonstrates “how the gospel was preached to strictly non-Bible-oriented audiences.”

Johnson lists the passage along with Acts 17:16-32 where Paul in Athens confronts the non-Jewish pagan philosophers with the message about Jesus Christ and Acts 14:15-17 where Paul preaches to the pagan Lycaonians. Johnson suggests the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (KJV) as those who do not know the gospel (similar to Barrett—his stance is introduced in a upcoming paragraph). This contradicts the understanding that Paul wrote to the brethren of faith in Rome. The idea also interferes with the words of the complete passage when it later states to whom “the truth of God is known.”

Hold, the truth, and in unrighteousness.

Who are these men who turn from God? They are those who suppress or hold the truth by their wickedness (NIV), hold the truth in unrighteousness (KJV), in their injustice hold back the truth (NJB) or push the truth away from themselves (NLT). This suppression or “holding down” of truth is another form of detrimental restraint. Similar forms of the word are found in Luke 4:42 and 2 Thessalonians 2:6, 7. These unrighteous men suppress the truth about God “[i]n their determination to practice iniquity.” This act of squelch endangers their own hearts as well as prevents or conceals the truth from

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reaching others.\textsuperscript{14} The suppression arises out of a selfish desire which hinders others who may not have the chance to learn the truth otherwise.

What is truth? The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary states that truth as it is mentioned in this passage “refers to knowledge concerning God.”\textsuperscript{15} This means the book of Romans was written to men who knew the truth. Barrett, however, does not share the same views. He maintains the epistle was not written to “the abandoned Gentile world . . . who had willfully rejected the Gospel,” or to the brethren in Rome, but was written to those who had not yet heard the gospel message.\textsuperscript{16} Barrett understands the book of Romans to have been written to the oblivious. However, this seems to contract the next several words in the passage.

\textit{Is known. and in them.}

The passage continues for the truth about God is known to them instinctively (NLT) or that which may be known about God is manifest in them (KJV), what may be known about God is plain to them (NIV) and what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them (NJB). The underlying message in this section is that God reveals Himself and it is known without a doubt to man. The revelation—or truth or what may be known—of God is through His deliberate self-disclosure.\textsuperscript{17} The words of the passage demonstrate that the recipients knew the truth. Both the NIV and NJB translations reiterate that the truth was plain to them. This truth about God was in them; that is, truth about God was in their hearts and minds.

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God hath shewed, from the creation. and clearly seen.

Ever since the creation of the world (NJB) or from the time the world was created (NLT), the invisible existence of God and his everlasting power (NJB)—his eternal power and divine nature (NIV, NLT)—have been clearly seen (NIV). Since the creation, that is, ever since the beginning, humans have seen or understood God. The word invisible in juxtaposition with the word seen creates an oxymoron, because it “indicate that what is sensuously imperceptible is nevertheless clearly apprehended in mental conception.” This suggests the word seen is not a physical action per se but a cognitive process. When the word seen associates with the words understood or perceived, it makes sense to conclude that there is evidence that reveals the goodness and love of God—or as Murray refers to it “the manifestation given in the visible creation.” This extends the evidence from the brethren in Rome to all humans.

Invisible things. and Godhead.

The eternal power and divine nature or Godhead is that which is invisible or the invisible attributes of God. What is clearly seen or understood is that “God is God and not man.” Observation of created life reveals that creations does not reveal the key to its own existence. That is, the visible images or idols do not substitute the invisible attributes of God. It is true that creation or the “things that are made’ testify that One of infinite power created this earth.” Even certain heathens recognize and acknowledge the power of a Creator. However, this does not mean the creation replaces the Creator.

Without excuse.

The passage ends with the declaration so these people have no excuse (NJB) for not knowing God (NLT). Paul assumes that the raw materials or evidence for the knowledge of God exists on this earth. The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary states “[t]he revelation of God through conscience and nature is sufficient to enlighten men as to the divine requirements.” Does anyone have a valid excuse to live not in accordance with the revelation of God? The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary responds “[i]n the face of this revelation, they are without excuse for the nonperformance of duty, that is, for their idolatry and for hindering the truth.”

In simpler form, the editors clearly agree that the response is negative.

Textual Meaning

Historical Context

In reiteration and affirmation of the introduction, few scholars debate the Pauline authorship in regards to the epistle to the Romans. Support is found not only in the theme of the grace of God but in the evidence that the person who wrote the letter was “without doubt a Jew who was thoroughly familiar with Pharisaical Judaism (Acts 23:6), as well as one who was burdened to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47).” The apostle Paul wrote the epistle to the brethren of faith in Rome. Brooten refers to the recipients as “the Roman community of those who believed in Christ.” Meanwhile, deviations exists such as Barrett who believed otherwise. Barrett maintains in his stance that the epistle was written

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to those of the Roman community who did not know the gospel message. However, the evidence against this position is substantial.

The church in Rome was not established by Paul, for he had not yet visited Rome at the time of writing the Roman letter. It was not established by Peter; the apostle was in Jerusalem during the Jerusalem Council (A.D. 49). Prior to that time, Peter seemed “to have engaged only in missionary activities which did not take him far from Jerusalem (Acts 9:32-11:18).”¹²⁴ Corley presents two possibilities of establishment for the church in Rome. First, the church may have been established through the witnessing of the early converts. Another possibility is that the church in Rome was established as a result of the witnessing of proselytes, Roman Jews, who were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Perhaps the truth of the establishment involves elements from both of these factors.

A relatively small number of scholars hold that the church in Rome was predominantly Jewish. However, the traditional view is that the church was by large a Gentile church.

**Purpose**

The purpose of the epistle of Romans is to communicate the universal sinful nature of man and the universal grace of God which provides pardon and restoration to perfection and holiness. The only way to live in delight of this grace is to have faith in the death, resurrection and live of Jesus Christ. He lives to reconcile sinners to God and to restore us.

The mind of the apostle Paul is full of issues that clash with the Judaizers as he writes this epistle. He answers basic questions through a broad context of the problem of sin (and the solution through Jesus Christ). Paul states that all men—either Jews or

Gentiles—continue to fall short of the ideal because of sin. There is no excuse for this, because all individuals have received some revelation of the will of God. Therefore, everyone is justly under condemnation. Sinful men are in an even deeper predicament, because they are incapable of extricating themselves from this predicament. A sinner finds it is impossible to obey the will of God. Any legalistic attempts to obey the divine law are not only doomed to failure but may also reveal the arrogance and self-righteous characteristics of the sinner who refuses to recognize his or her weakness and need of a Savior. God provides the remedy—by the sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ. All that God wants is for fallen man to accept the provisions made for his past sins and to accept the Jesus Christ to lead a life of righteousness through faith.

My Paraphrase

“The strong reaction of God towards sin is being shown from heaven against those who live in rebellion against both God and men and who restrain the truth of God with their own desires to practice injustice; because the truth about His presence is made basic to them; for God shows it to them. Ever since the creation of the world, the attributes of God—eternal power and divine nature—have been understood. People have no excuse for not knowing God.”
Conclusion

Summary

The purpose of this exegesis paper was to come to an understanding of the meaning of Romans 1:18-20. In the textual analysis, various translations of scripture were compared to deduce keywords and define them. *Meaning was derived from* or the *meaning was drawn out of* a given passage in Scripture by comparing perceptions from two different groups of people at separate periods of time: the time of the inspired apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans and the time of today.

The apostle Paul wrote the epistles to the Romans with the issues that were raised in controversies with the Judaizers in mind. He answered basic questions in broader context. Instead of addressing various sins, Paul dwelt with the universal problem of sin. Sin disconnects man from the life source; however, there is hope through the grace of Jesus Christ. While creation reveals God, a creature or created is never to take the place of the Creator. These concepts that Paul address to the brethren in Rome are not limited to the recipients which are in the time period. There is meaning for today.

Because Paul address the issues in the broader context of sin, readers today associate with the notion that keeping the law does not make us righteous. It is only through the faith we have in the grace from Jesus Christ. This is not something we can force, but it is a deliberate choice to choose eternal life. While the book of Romans was originally written to a select group of people in earlier times, exegesis extended the message beyond a limited few to every person in the world in any generation.
Works Cited