

Romans 1:14

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise.

Analysis

I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise.

Paul's sense of mission is framed as obligation: Hellēsin te kai barbarois, sophois te kai anoētois opheiletēs eimi ("Ελλησίν τε καὶ βαρβάροις, σοφοῖς τε καὶ ἀνοήτοις ὄφειλέτης εἰμί, 'both to Greeks and barbarians, both to wise and foolish, I am debtor'). Opheiletēs (ὄφειλέτης, debtor/one who owes) indicates that Paul's apostleship created obligation. Having freely received the gospel, he owed it to others (1 Corinthians 9:16: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!').

The pairs Hellēsin/barbarois (Greeks/barbarians) and sophois/anoētois (wise/foolish) are comprehensive categories. Hellēsin refers to Greek-speaking, culturally Hellenized peoples; barbarois (βάρβαροι) refers to non-Greek peoples (the term imitates how foreign languages sounded: 'bar-bar'). Sophois (σοφοί, wise) and anoētois (ἀνοήτοις, foolish/unlearned) cover all educational levels. Paul's mission transcended cultural and intellectual boundaries—the gospel is for all without distinction. This inclusive vision echoes Colossians 3:11: 'There is neither Greek nor Jew... barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.'

Historical Context

The Roman Empire was linguistically divided between Greek-speaking East and Latin-speaking West, but Greek was the lingua franca. 'Barbarians' included

various tribal peoples on the empire's frontiers—Celts, Germans, Scythians—viewed by Greeks and Romans as culturally inferior. Paul's willingness to evangelize 'barbarians' and 'foolish' people was radical, as most philosophers reserved truth for the educated elite. Christianity's egalitarian message attracted slaves, women, and lower classes, sparking criticism from Roman intellectuals.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. To whom do you feel 'indebted' (όφειλέτης) to share the gospel—which cultural, educational, or socioeconomic groups?
2. What cultural prejudices or intellectual snobbery prevent you from seeing all people as equally needing and worthy of hearing the gospel?
3. How does Paul's all-encompassing mission challenge the modern church's tendency to target demographically similar 'people groups'?

Interlinear Text

Ἐλλησίν τε καὶ βαρβάροις σοφοῖς τε καὶ
to the Greeks both and to the Barbarians to the wise both and
G1672 G5037 G2532 G915 G4680 G5037 G2532

ἀνοήτοις ὄφειλέτης εἰμί¹
to the unwise debtor I am
G453 G3781 G1510

Additional Cross-References

Acts 9:15 (Parallel theme): But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:

Colossians 3:11 (Parallel theme): Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free: but Christ is all, and in all.

Acts 22:21 (Parallel theme): And he said unto me, Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles.

Isaiah 35:8 (Parallel theme): And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.

Romans 8:12 (Parallel theme): Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh.

Romans 13:8 (Parallel theme): Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law.

Romans 12:16 (Parallel theme): Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits.

Romans 1:22 (Parallel theme): Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools,

Romans 16:19 (Parallel theme): For your obedience is come abroad unto all men. I am glad therefore on your behalf: but yet I would have you wise unto that which is good, and simple concerning evil.

2 Corinthians 11:19 (Parallel theme): For ye suffer fools gladly, seeing ye yourselves are wise.