

The Social Context of First-Century Roman Christianity

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Whoever coined the phrase “Rome was not built in a day” established a permanent reminder that the Eternal City had a long history.¹ That history already extended back over eight hundred years when the disciples of Jesus brought their message to Rome.

Modern readers of the book of Romans, addressed to the Saints in Rome, sometimes have difficulty understanding the rich content and diverse issues found in one of the most influential books in the New Testament. In writing this book, Paul wrote to readers who probably understood the social reality of the many groups living in Rome at the time and who would have had no difficulty understanding his message and intent. However, most modern readers are not familiar with the social context and historical setting that help a reader to appreciate the nuances found in Paul’s long epistle. That social context is the essence of this essay. Through its content, the reader will have a better understanding and appreciation of the Rome that Paul wrote about—in particular, issues dealing with ethnicity, gender, and class. The book of Romans will then, I hope, be appreciated in new ways as the reader gains appropriate understanding of Paul’s world—the social context of first-century Roman Christianity.

The Roman Capital

Rome, capital of the Roman Empire from the reign of Augustus (27 B.C.—A.D. 14) until that of Diocletian (A.D. 284—305), was the largest and most splendid city in antiquity.² The effort the Romans put into beautifying part of the city while allowing the slums to expand reflects a part of the social condition at the time the first Christians began to worship in the imperial capital.

Earliest Rome was centered around the Esquiline and Quirinal hills. Under Rome’s Etruscan kings, the Capitoline hill emerged as the very heart of the Roman establishment, with its magnificent temples; the nearby Palatine contained residences and eventually the palace of the emperors. Between them lay the area of the Velabrum, leading to the Tiber, which formed the western boundary. To the north was the Pincian hill, and south of it the hills and valleys led all the way to the Caelian hill, where the *Castra Praetoria*, Paul’s prison, was situated.

According to the *Res Gestae of Augustus* (a document written in A.D. 14 and read in the Senate after his death the same year) the plebeian class at Rome in the time of Augustus numbered 320,000, not counting women and children.³ When added to the senatorial and equestrian classes, the total free population would have been nearly 700,000. In addition, the slaves of the city probably equaled half that number, augmenting the tally to well over a million. Rome was also the destination of many foreign travelers. Some estimates have placed the combined population at more than one million in the first century.⁴

Little wonder that all carts and wheeled traffic were forbidden in the city during the day. The only exception was the *carpentum*, or small cart, used by the Vestal Virgins and the ladies of the court. Foot traffic crowded the streets, and Rome acquired a lasting reputation for dirtiness and squalor. Housing was of two kinds. The wealthy had large, private houses (*domus*), sort of inner-city villas. Generally they were found in the more fashionable parts on the hills of Rome. In marked contrast were the *insulae*, cramped quarters in tall apartment buildings that housed the middle and lower classes, who were packed into dirty little rooms as unsanitary as they were susceptible to fire.

Besides population, another major factor in the crowding was the incessant series of mammoth building programs. Rome, under Augustus and his successors, was subjected to constant renovation and rebuilding. From the Capitoline to the Aventine hills to the Campus Martius and beyond, all the way to the Vatican hill, emperors erected arches, columns, baths, circuses, palaces, temples, theaters, basilicas, and forums. Monuments were everywhere—so many in fact that free spaces were wholly consumed. And yet these architectural feats made Rome the envy of the world.

Augustus set the tone. He declared that he found Rome a city of bricks and left it a metropolis of marble. With the help of Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, the boast was made true. The grandeur of Rome was celebrated while the broad policies of Julius Caesar (49–44 B.C.) were completed. With the Temple of Castor and Pollux and the Temple of Mars finished, the famed Forum Romanum was altered significantly. Further, the Campus Martius to the north was developed as a viable part of the city, largely by Marcus Agrippa. There citizens could find theaters, the Pantheon, the Baths of Agrippa, and the Temple of Neptune. A partial list of Augustus's other marvels in stone include the Forum Augustum, the Curia Julia, the Basilica Julia, the Temple of Divus Julius, and the Theater of Marcellus.

Tiberius (A.D. 14–37) initiated little construction, in keeping with his own austere nature. He did finish the Augustan projects and ordered the creation of the Temple of Divus Augustus. Of note was the Domus Tiberiana, the splendid great imperial place on the Palatine, which, however, was considered inadequate by Gaius Caligula (A.D. 37–41).

Caligula not only upgraded the Domus but had the curious habit of raising temples to himself. He also allowed Isis followers to have a place of worship on the Campus Martius and then desecrated the Temple of Divus Augustus by placing a bridge over it to connect his palace on the Palatine with the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitol. His successor, Claudius (A.D. 41–54), focused on those imperial efforts that would most benefit the city. He improved the harbor at Ostia to ensure grain supplies and rebuilt the water system. The aqueducts at Rome had always been extensive, providing fresh water from the early days of the Republic. Their care had been entrusted to the censor and the aediles; Claudius created the office of *curator aquarum*, head of the water board.

Aside from the Golden House and the reconstruction of Rome, both springing from the fire of 64, Nero (A.D. 54–68) spent much time and money on other buildings of suitably grand scope, such as the Circus Gai et Neronis and the Neronian Baths. Nero's original Domus Transitoria, linking the Palatine and the Esquiline hills, was a disappointment, for it could not encompass his vision of a proper home. The fire made the replacement, the Domus Aurea, possible.

With the death of Burrus in 62 and the retirement of Seneca, a reign of terror descended upon the city. Support for the emperor dwindled by 65, when elements of the Senate and the depleted nobility joined forces in the Pisonian conspiracy. Although crushed, the plot signaled the eventual downfall of Nero, who was ousted in 68; a bloody civil war followed in 69, which ended with the conquest of the city by legions supporting Vespasian. During these struggles, the authorities chose to make Christians the scapegoats, and the early church was cruelly persecuted.

Roman Religion

Roman religion focused on the public or state priesthood, personal expression, and household and family observance. The pantheon of Roman gods was composed of a diversity of gods associated with different aspects of Roman life. Unlike the Greeks, the Romans had no mythology—no genealogies of the gods, and gods with no

offspring. Like the Greeks, Romans believed only a temple or at least a sacred image of the deity ensured the presence of a god in the city. As in other ancient religions, sacrifice was the main element of worship. Rome established an openness toward new deities as long as the Roman gods remained supreme.⁵

Social Status

Roman society had a clearly defined class structure.⁶ At the pinnacle of the social pyramid were the senatorials, comprised of some nine hundred senators and their families.⁷ Their grand villas dominated the central sections of Rome, and their clientele constituted an important group. Their wealth far surpassed that of individuals in other classes with only a few exceptions. Membership in the senatorial class had been limited to those with both wealth and a long pedigree of honored ancestors, but from the beginning of the Principate, some wealthy men with lower-class ancestors as recently as two generations back were able to enter the Senate. One of the requirements for membership in the Senate was a class rating of one million sesterces, 250,000 times a laborer's daily wage. Most senatorial wealth was invested in property such as homes in the city, country villas, and farms.⁸ Most of the highest governmental offices in Rome were held by this class.

Next in rank was the equestrian class, the *ordo equester*. Individuals were eligible for enrollment if they could claim two generations of free birth and if they possessed about one-half a senator's wealth.⁹ *Equites* (knights), unlike members of the senatorial class, were allowed unlimited participation in commerce, trading, and governmental contracts. But they tended to emulate their social betters, and even those who engaged in business generally invested their capital in land. Although most were wealthy men whose ancestors were free Romans or provincials, the descendants of freed slaves were also able to enter this class from the time of Augustus, who started this practice.

Just below the senatorial and equestrian classes in legal status was the freeborn Roman citizenry, the plebs. This group included all Romans from those just below equestrian status to the poor who were dependent on the daily dole.¹⁰ Tacitus made a sharp distinction, however, between Romans who supported themselves adequately and the destitute. Thus only the former will be included in this category. Tacitus calls them the *populus integer*, the "respectable populace."¹¹ He may have in mind a passage in Livy in which the *populus integer* is contrasted with the poor.¹² Although of lower legal status than freeborn Romans, some freed slaves who had gained citizenship, particularly those of the imperial household, earned considerable wealth and gained a status virtually equal to respectable Romans. However, it is misleading to lump these two groups into an economic middle class. They did not have a unified class consciousness and only generally fulfilled some of the functions of the modern middle class. Also in this category were freeborn Greeks, perhaps with Roman citizenship, who had voluntarily migrated to the capital and taken up business there. These people shared a common desire to rise in wealth and status.

Unlike the aristocracy, the *populus integer* generally did not avoid manual labor, at least not until they became wealthy enough to do so. This group also included rich and experienced freedmen who invested in risky shipping enterprises or who operated a number of businesses. It included Roman citizens who owned their own shops or craft businesses and who worked alongside their one slave or free laborer. They put a high value on honesty in business dealings and preferred a person's promise to collateral.¹³ In imitation of the aristocracy, they feasted as lavishly as they could afford. The less wealthy among them joined street or craft associations in which they could find comradeship and share the cost of great banquets and funerals. In this group and among the *equites* were

found people who had some degree of upward social mobility. Though not all were upwardly mobile, a far greater percentage from these groups saw an increase in wealth and status over their lifetime than from any other group.

In first-century Italy, somewhere between 25 and 40 percent of the population were slaves.¹⁴ A large percentage of the rest probably were freedmen (*liberti*) or were descended from freedmen. Slaves belonging to the households of the wealthy or moderately wealthy had, in some ways, a better life than the free poor of the city. Unlike the free poor, such a slave was assured three meals a day, lodging, clothing, and health care. Urban slaves who were being prepared for posts in the government bureaucracy received a superior education. Many other slaves in the cities were better educated than the freeborn poor. Such slaves could look forward to freedom between the ages of thirty and forty. While working for their master, they were allowed to earn and save money with which they hoped eventually to purchase their freedom. The freed slaves would, after the Roman custom, have become *liberti* and have assumed the *nomen gentile* of their former master, retaining their original name as a cognomen.

The most fortunate slaves were those belonging to the emperor. Some imperial slaves, even before manumission, had their own slaves, and when acting on behalf of the emperor, they had authority over freeborn Romans. It was not unknown for an imperial freedman to rise to wealthy prominence and join the *populus urbanus*.¹⁵

At the bottom of the social pyramid were the free poor.¹⁶ Tacitus calls those who frequented the circus and theaters the “shabby people” (*plebs sordida*).¹⁷ He seems to place alongside them the slaves who were not dependents of the “great houses” (mentioned earlier in the passage) and “spendthrifts and bankrupts.” Together, they were part of a class in habitual need who spent most of their day working to meet immediate necessities—if they could find work. Many had been yeoman farmers or were descendants of yeoman farmers who had lost their property through indebtedness. A few were able to rise out of poverty, but others who had incurred overwhelming debt were joining its ranks. Ramsay MacMullen thinks this group probably constituted a third of the population of Rome.¹⁸ The arenas of Rome attracted destitute Roman citizens who, during fifty-seven days of public games each year, could forget their poverty.

In the first and second centuries A.D., every Roman citizen over the age of eleven (the minimum age may have been fourteen) was entitled to the dole, a grain allotment estimated at two-fifths of the minimum needed by any given individual.¹⁹ So they had to supplement their income in some fashion. The state did not adequately provide for the needs of the aged, widows, orphans, disabled, or the sick. As a result, once such people used up their paltry savings, they joined the destitute rabble of the city who caused Cicero and Tacitus so much consternation. The slave whose master had inadequate resources found it more difficult to earn his freedom. And once his freedom was earned, he might find himself competing unsuccessfully with cheap slave labor without the economic support of his former master. The poor descendants of freedmen were beneath Tacitus’s notice but comprised a sizable portion of Rome’s population. They attempted to support themselves with the simple trades and skills they possessed, often working at jobs that poor citizens considered too menial.

Foreign Groups

Rome, as the capital of the empire, attracted large foreign colonies from the provinces of the Mediterranean area.²⁰ The columbaria (vaults with niches for urns containing ashes of the dead) of the imperial period of Rome reveal that many persons with foreign names, both slaves and freed, had lived and were buried there. Foreign cults

too were brought there: that of Mithras (as early as the reign of Tiberius), of Isis and Osiris, of Dea Syria (whom Nero himself revered), and of Judaism.²¹

Among the non-Roman population were those who came by choice; however, most came to Rome involuntarily as slaves and prisoners of war. As the empire grew, thousands of war captives from Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt, Greece, Africa, Spain, and elsewhere came to the capital. Evidently, most of these slaves were Greeks and Orientals. Because these slaves were often able to gain their freedom, freedmen and their descendants made up a considerable portion of the free population by the first century B.C. Some scholars assert that by then, freedmen and their descendants made up the largest part of the plebs, the free poor.²²

The decreasing birth rates among native Romans, the establishment of foreign colonies, and military recruitment added to the declining numbers of native Romans. By the first century A.D., foreigners and their descendants may have made up the majority of the *plebs urbana*, along with a large population of free resident aliens (*peregrini*) and the entire slave class.²³ Of course, slaves of foreign origin were forced to reside with their masters and undoubtedly worked in close proximity to slaves of various nationalities. Freedmen and free immigrants, however, sought to live with others of their own nationality during the early stages of their socialization into the new culture. Additionally, they replaced those who left the ethnic groups to join the larger society. These foreigners and new immigrants crowded into the Roman tenement houses (*insulae*) and usually tended to congregate in individual *insulae* with others of the same nationality. This process allowed such groups to maintain their languages and cultures and thus live as partially autonomous units within Rome. Likewise, these groups often worked together. George La Piana says that certain trades and crafts in Rome were practiced mainly by skilled foreigners from cities or provinces known to specialize in that profession.²⁴ These skills existed in Rome in profusion only because of the influx of foreign workers.

Seemingly, before assimilating into the larger society, foreigners congregated in certain parts of the city as well as in individual *insulae*. Foreigners chose to reside at the Aventine during imperial times because of its proximity to the harbor on the Tiber. Other archaeological finds prove that the Aventine and its surrounding area were always hospitable to the Oriental cults, which took their place beside the old and venerable deities of Roman religions.

Another feature of society in Rome at this period was the presence of private associations (*collegia*), which could be organized for almost any purpose and were to enjoy a long history in Rome. However, from the end of the Republic to the third century A.D., they were regulated by strict laws. Political associations, on the other hand, were forbidden, and other types of associations had to be individually approved by the Senate or emperor. Associations were attractive to those in the lower classes and to foreigners, for they provided a sense of belonging and honor lacking in the larger Roman society. A member of a *collegium* was equal to every other member, at least in theory. Meetings were usually held in a shrine of the patron deity. Poor men could pool their meager resources and put on great banquets. An obvious major concern of all associations among the poor was proper burial arrangements for deceased members. The less wealthy, as well as freedmen or slaves without well-to-do patrons or owners, were concerned to avoid the fate of those who could not afford a proper funeral: burial in a mass grave.

Associations allowed these groups to practice their unique religious customs, to follow a life adapted to their social conditions, and to react against the social exclusion practiced by the larger society. Some associations were composed of men occupying the same profession. Of the several hundred professional associations in Rome, a number were probably composed entirely of foreigners.²⁵ This is not surprising, especially considering their role in commerce. For example, most merchants in Rome during the imperial period were from the eastern provinces.

Religious associations were another important type of *collegia*. Even slaves were often allowed to join the associations of their fellow foreigners. Following their ancestral religious practices and providing for burial according to their own traditions helped maintain their cultural identity. The gathering of Jews would have been viewed in much the same context and come under the same rules as the funeral associations. Thus their banquets and celebrations would have fit well in a Roman social context—the same would have been true of the Christians.

Arising in the first century A.D., burial associations also attracted foreigners. At first, apparently, they were not *collegia* but cooperative societies that bought cemetery ground at common expense. As such, they did not need official governmental approval. Under the Flavians, these cooperatives were gradually replaced by associations organized by and for poor residents of Rome (*collegia tenuiorum*). Dominated by foreigners, these associations did not need official recognition by the Senate or emperor. However, they were required to submit a list of members to obtain a permit from the city prefect.²⁶

Slaves and freedmen of the same household sometimes formed *collegia domestica*. These associations often differed from other *collegia* because their membership included individuals with different ethnic backgrounds, having nothing in common except residence in the same household. Furthermore, these associations were officially located in the master's *domus*. It is uncertain whether they needed official recognition.²⁷ Finally, some unauthorized associations were allowed to remain undisturbed provided they were not involved in public disorder.²⁸

Rome was generally tolerant of the various religious practices brought to the city by an increasing number of foreigners. As long as these religious groups recognized the sovereignty of Rome, they were accorded quiet toleration and legal protection—and sometimes even the favor of the state. However, if they became too public, putting themselves on an equal footing with the gods of the state, they risked violent repression. By the time of Claudius's reign, the state realized that the Eastern religions were too widespread and powerful to be ignored; among them were the Jews of the Diaspora, apparently a group well-known to the public.

Cult of Isis

Among the many Oriental cults arriving in the capital city, the Cult of Isis was clearly one of the most popular. Isis, sister and consort of Osiris, was regarded as “protector of women and marriage; goddess of maternity and the new-born; guarantor of the fertility of fields and abundance of harvests.”²⁹ Sailors and traders carried her cultic influences to Rome. While there was popular resistance to foreign cults, Isis became very successful—Gaius Caligula built a large temple to her in the Campus Martius.

Jews

In terms of the long history of the Diaspora, the Jewish community in Rome is comparatively young. The first mention of its existence occurs in 139 B.C.,³⁰ but within a century, the Roman population had a significant Jewish representation. The numbers increased when Jews came to Rome under Pompey and Vespasian as slaves, so that as many as fifty thousand Jews lived in Rome by the end of the first century A.D. Apparently, they were among the largest of the foreign groups in the city; because Judaism required them to live apart from gentiles and to follow a strict dietary regime, they often lived in specific neighborhoods in Rome.

The oldest and largest settlement of Jews was in Transtiberinum (modern Trastevere); seven synagogues existed in this area alone. Archaeological studies during the early part of this century have clarified the extent to which Jews built synagogues in Rome during this period. Many synagogues had sprung up in Rome by A.D. 49. The relaxation of regulations governing *collegia* by Roman government officials contributed to this increase. The government sanctioned them as official religious associations, but Jewish *collegia* differed considerably from other religious associations because their members met for common meals and collected funds for support of their poor and for the temple in Jerusalem. They were exempt from military service and had their own court system.³¹

Archaeological evidence further suggests that each synagogue had its own name, such as the synagogue of Agrippa—friend of Herod and general of Augustus—or one named for Volumnius, the procurator of the Syrian province at the time of Herod the Great. Herodians and Austesians were names of two other synagogues.

Harry J. Leon suggests that although each Jewish synagogue tended to be homogeneous in character, Roman Jewry was heterogeneous. He bases this proposition on the study of three Jewish catacombs. The Appia catacomb featured a larger percent of Latin inscriptions (36%) than either Monteverde (20%) or Nomentana (6%). The Nomentana catacomb shows a preponderance of Greek inscriptions (93%), and Monteverde (78%) and Appia (64%) have less. Unlike the Greek inscriptions, all the Latin inscriptions at Nomentana are on marble, possibly demonstrating a higher social class.³²

It is apparent that a connection between immigration and organization of the synagogues existed in Rome. Inscriptions are usually in Greek and seldom, except in later times, in Latin. Only a few Hebrew inscriptions appear, and these are all religious quotations.³³ A large percentage of first-century Roman Jews continued to speak Greek in Rome, and it was in this language that Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans. The conclusion drawn from these inscriptions is that the Jews in Rome were a diverse and fragmented group with autonomous congregations and leaders.

Surprising, though, is the lack of a single, controlling, citywide organizational structure of Roman Jewry. La Piana argues: “The actual character of the Jewish community would have made impossible the concentration of power in one hand. As has been stated above, the Roman Jewry was by no means a homogeneous body.”³⁴ This loose structure provided an essential prerequisite for the early penetration of Christianity in Rome and accounts for its rapid advance in the imperial capital. The multitude of congregations and the absence of a central Jewish governing body made it easy for the Christian missionaries to preach in the synagogues of Rome. Only central authority could have revoked permission for Jewish-Christian missionaries to remain in the independent congregations. Because Roman synagogues had no such authority, Christian missionary activity was possible with little effective hindrance.

Even though Judaism lacked respect from most of the Roman elite,³⁵ a number of non-Jews apparently found the teachings and practices of Judaism attractive. Of the several hundred inscriptions, only four or five refer to proselytes. Eight more refer to “God-fearers,” persons who had not fully converted to Judaism.³⁶ They were attracted to the moral teachings of Judaism and kept the Jewish Sabbath but were deterred from full conversion by Judaism’s complicated ritual prescriptions, dietary laws, social limitations, and—above all—the requirement that men be circumcised. This suggests that “God-fearers” found Christianity attractive, for it offered the advantages of Judaism without some of the burdens.

Christians

Now that the social context of Rome at the time of the introduction of Christianity to the imperial capital has been outlined, readers can turn their attention to the specific issue of the introduction of Christianity among the Jews of the Diaspora living in Rome at that time.

According to Luke, Christian missionary activity typically started in Jewish synagogues. Acts 13:5 is typical of the evangelical procedure: “And when they were at Sala mis, they preached the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews.” One can assume that the same procedure began the process in Rome. The existence of organized Jewish synagogues there offered a necessary precondition for the establishment of Christian congregations.

When and by whom Christianity came to Rome remains unknown. In Acts 2:10, Luke lists among the “Jews and proselytes” gathered in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost “Roman sojourners.” *Epidemountes* does not mean “residents” of Jerusalem; they were rather pilgrim “sojourners.” Acts 6:9 also speaks of a “synagogue of the freedmen” (*libertinon*)—that is, of *libertini*, Jewish slaves who had managed to gain their freedom in the Roman world. These freedmen could actually have come from anywhere in the Roman Empire, but many of them might well have been descendants of Jerusalem Jews taken to Rome by Pompey as prisoners of war in 63 B.C.

If some of the Roman sojourners in Jerusalem were among the three thousand Jews converted to Christianity according to the Lucan account (see Acts 2:10–11, 41), they may have formed the nucleus of the Christian community in Rome on their return there. Thus the Roman Christian community would have had its origins in the Jewish community. Additionally, the community undoubtedly also grew by the gradual emigration of Christians from the provinces, traveling to the capital during the forties via the Jewish Diaspora. These first converts probably pursued their new religious understanding within the Jewish synagogue context and did not assert a separate Christian identity.

A fourth-century Christian writer notes:

It is evident then that there were Jews living in Rome . . . in the time of the apostles. Some of these Jews, who had come to believe (in Christ), passed on to the Romans (the tradition) that they should acknowledge Christ and keep the law. . . . One ought not to be angry with the Romans, but praise their faith, because without seeing any signs of miracles and without any of the apostles they came to embrace faith in Christ, though according to a Jewish rite.³⁷

Ambrosiaster’s suggestion that the first Christians in Rome followed the “Jewish rite” may indicate an originally Jewish-Christian community in Rome. By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Romans, a primarily gentile-Christian community existed in Rome.

The shift in the character and organizational structure of the Christian community from essentially a Jewish-Christian group located in the Jewish synagogues to a dominant gentile-Christian group located in separate and distinct house-church congregations may be understood in the context of an important historical incident in Rome. Writing about A.D. 120, the Roman historian Suetonius, who had been the private secretary of the emperor Hadrian and who wrote *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, reports that the emperor Claudius “expelled from Rome Jews who were making constant disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.”³⁸ This sounds as though one Chrestus was a rabble-rouser or extremist who incited the Jews of Rome to riot.

Chrēsto, meaning “useful, good, valuable,” was a common Greek name of slaves and freedmen in the Roman world at the time.³⁹ The name Chrestus was also used by Romans, both slaves and free—for instance, P. Aelius Chrestus.

Many scholars argue that Suetonius did not understand the name *Christos* (by *iotacism*, the tendency in the Greek language to pronounce various vowels and diphthongs as *ι*).⁴⁰

Assuming this reconstruction, Suetonius would have been referring to a conflict between Jews and Jewish-Christians of Rome in the late forties. The constant disturbances would, it has been supposed, have been caused by Jews who opposed those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah or Lord and who consequently differed in their interpretation of the law, thereby threatening religious unity and identity in the Jewish congregations in Rome. These disturbances were happening so frequently that they became the reason for the imperial banishment of Jews and Jewish-Christians from Rome. Though a most severe blow to Roman Jewry, the expulsion of the Jews from Rome also meant the end of the presence of the first Jewish-Christians there.

Paul

By the time Paul's epistle arrived in Rome, the gentile congregations had spread widely throughout the empire and now offered their own set of problems for the apostles—especially Paul. The situation in Rome afforded opportunities to address the problems arising in a world where gentiles were increasingly turning to the Christian faith, for Paul writes to congregations whose significant gentile component was being affected by the return of the Jews to Rome after their expulsion under Claudius had been rescinded.

The situation in Rome concerned Paul and apparently put the gospel at risk, thus warranting the lengthy arguments in Romans 1–11 to correct the problem that had arisen. Many scholars over the last few decades have attempted to show the relationship of the argument section (Romans 1–11) to the exhortation section (Romans 12–16). J. G. D. Dunn writes that Romans 14:1–15:13 “most likely . . . evidences Paul's knowledge of circumstances in Rome itself, at least in broad terms.”⁴¹ And Günther Bornkamm points out that the book of Romans clearly expresses the “world-wide program of the Pauline mission” like no other New Testament epistle and that the question of “the strong and weak in Romans 14–15 is placed into the main context of this world mission.”⁴²

Francis Watson presupposes not one congregation in which the Jewish and gentile members “disagree about the law” but two separate congregations—a Jewish-Christian congregation and a gentile-Christian congregation—which Paul “wishes to bring together into one congregation.”⁴³ That Paul does not address the “church in Rome,” as was his custom (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:1), suggests such a setting (Romans 1:7). Watson, like E. P. Sanders, concludes that “what Paul finds wrong in Judaism [is simply that] it is not Christianity.”⁴⁴ Watson's claim that Paul is trying to get the Jewish-Christians to abandon the synagogue entirely may go too far, but he does offer a cogent argument regarding the *Sitz im Leben* of Romans.

Watson pieces together the social reality that lies behind Acts 18:2 and Romans 14:1–15:13. The antecedent history that anticipated the occasion referred to in this section probably involved some kind of dispute over the preaching of Jesus the Messiah in the Jewish quarter in Rome. When Claudius expelled all Jews (including Jewish-Christians), the gentile-Christians began to have their own identity apart from the synagogue and to develop their own expression of Christianity—i.e., gentile-Christianity.

After the Jews were allowed to return to Rome, the Jewish-Christians found two significant changes: first, the rise of a gentile expression of Christianity that was meeting apart from the synagogue in house-churches; and second, the returning Jewish-Christians were not welcomed back into the Jewish quarter. Watson suggests that non-

Christian Jews blamed the Christians for the expulsion, thus creating a hostile relationship between themselves and the Jewish-Christian population. This in turn created another dilemma—which Watson suggests explains Paul’s use of the terms *weak* and *strong* in Romans 14–15.

When the Jewish-Christians were able to live in the Jewish quarter, they, along with their “kinsmen according to the flesh,” were able to find kosher meat and wine. Once the Jewish-Christians were resettled in a gentile environment, cut off from their community in which such clean meat and wine could be obtained, the observant Jewish-Christians would only eat vegetables.⁴⁵

Wolfgang Wiefel, who had earlier posited a similar scenario to Watson’s, suggests that Paul is writing “to assist the Gentile Christian majority, who are the primary addressees of the letter, to live together with the Jewish-Christians in one congregation, thereby putting an end to their quarrels about status.”⁴⁶

Whatever other conflicts arose because of the situation in Rome, Paul speaks to an “acceptance” of the “weak” and the “strong” within the context of worship (Romans 15:7–12). For whatever reason, the “strong” were not accepting the Jewish-Christian believers within the worshiping Christian community. In Rome, it seems clear, two separate expressions of Christianity existed. This is the situation to which the apostle to the gentiles applies his lengthy, theological argument in Romans 1–11. It seems reasonable, then, to agree with Watson’s two-congregation scenario. The content of the argument sections (Romans 1–11) is anticipated in Paul’s introduction, Romans 1:1–5, in which he declares that he had been called and set apart to proclaim the gospel of God. This gospel has as its focus Jesus, God’s Messiah-King-Son, whose coming has inaugurated the time when God’s eschatological and messianic promises are fulfilled. And this, in turn, results in the nations coming to faithful obedience to Jesus.

The introduction to Paul’s argument is his theological comment on the two-congregation problem in Rome. Indeed, it is correct to underscore the social dimension reflected in the epistle. The two quarreling groups are called to unity because it is the time for all nations to praise and glorify God. This seems to be Paul’s point in quoting Old Testament texts about gentiles being included in the eschatological worship of God (see Romans 15:9–12).

Conclusion

In Rome, immigrants tended to form communities with shared native tongues, customs, and gods. They also organized associations as groups, such as the poorer Romans who lacked connections with the great houses. In these associations they held great banquets in imitation of the upper classes. The Jews maintained a uniquely visible identity in the early empire period. The special privileges extended to them by the state allowed them to maintain the cultural legacy they inherited from Jerusalem. The fact that the synagogues were organizationally autonomous from one another probably helped preserve their differing customs and ways of adapting to Roman society. It was in this social milieu that Christianity in Rome began.

The first Christians in Rome were apparently Jewish. By the time Paul wrote his epistle to the Roman congregations, however, the situation had changed—gentiles appear to have predominated, while the Jewish presence was reduced to that of a significant minority. Thus at least two distinct social groups were present: Jewish converts to Christianity (and perhaps a few gentile proselytes to Judaism who in turn converted to Christianity) and a larger group of gentile-Christians. As the church in Rome remained Greek-speaking virtually

throughout the second century, this latter group probably was composed predominantly of free Greek-speaking foreigners at Rome and Greek-speaking slaves and freedmen.

Paul seems to address several distinct congregations (house-churches) in Romans 16, also known as the greetings chapter, as follows: (1) “Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus. . . . Likewise greet the church that is in their house” (Romans 16:3, 5); (2) “Salute them which are of Aristobulus’ household” (Romans 16:10); (3) “Greet them that be of the household of Narcissus, which are in the Lord” (Romans 16:11); (4) “Salute Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren which are with them” (Romans 16:14); and (5) “Salute Philologus, and Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints which are with them” (Romans 16:15).

The development of the house-church ensured the continued division between the individual Christian congregations as homogenous groups gathered in small circles of associates. Like Roman Jewry at the time, Christianity apparently had not developed a citywide organization. This was the audience to which Paul wrote from Corinth in the winter of A.D. 57–58. The congregations behind Romans 16 were diverse in ethnic origin, social status, and gender. Eventually, this diversity contributed to the divisions manifested at the end of the first century and beginning of the second century in Roman Christianity.⁴⁷

Notes

1. The phrase was allegedly coined by the sixteenth-century English dramatist John Heywood; see Antony Kamm, *The Romans* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1.
2. See William L. MacDonald, *The Architecture of the Roman Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965); the following summary is based on Lawrence Richardson Jr., *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992).
3. In several modern editions and commentaries; see, for example, E. G. Hardy, ed, *The Monumentum Ancyranum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923).
4. See Lesley Adkins and Roy A. Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314.
5. Burkhard Gladigow, “Roman Religion,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:809–15.
6. The word used for class by most Latin authors is *ordo*. “Class” seems a more useful translation than “order.”
7. See Géza Alföldy, *The Social History of Rome*, trans. David Braund and Frank Pollock, 3rd ed. (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 115; see also Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 93–94.
8. For example, Pliny the Younger’s 20 million sesterces “lay almost exclusively in land.” See *ibid.*, 116.
9. See *ibid.*, 123.
10. See Herbert Hill, *The Roman Middle Class in the Republican Period* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1952).
11. Tacitus, *Histories* 1.4.

12. Livy 9.46.11, 13, 14.
13. See MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 65.
14. See *ibid.*, 92, for the lower figure. For the higher, see Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1:9.
15. See Paul R. C. Weaver, *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor's Freedmen and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 224–30, 267–94.
16. See MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 92–93.
17. Tacitus, *Histories* 1.4.
18. See MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 93.
19. See Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, 38–39. See also Geoffrey Rickman, *The Corn Supply of Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 187–95.
20. See George La Piana, “Foreign Groups in Rome during the First Centuries of the Empire,” *Harvard Theological Review* 20/4 (1927): 183–403.
21. See Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1960).
22. See, for example, Tenney Frank, *An Economic History of Rome*, 2nd ed. rev. (New York: Cooper Square, 1962), 213–14.
23. See La Piana, “Foreign Groups,” 197.
24. See *ibid.*, 213.
25. See *ibid.*, 265.
26. See *ibid.*, 234, 274.
27. See *ibid.*, 275.
28. See *ibid.*, 245.
29. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), s.v. “Isis.”
30. See Leon, *Jews of Ancient Rome*, 4.
31. See Jean-Baptiste Frey, ed., *Corpus of Jewish Inscriptions* (1936; reprint, New York: Ktav, 1975), 1:65–87, for inscriptions describing the daily life and activities of Jews in Rome.
32. See Leon, *Jews of Ancient Rome*, 77.

33. See Harry J. Leon, "The Language of the Greek Inscriptions from the Jewish Catacombs of Rome," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 58 (1927): 210–33.
34. La Piana, "Foreign Groups," 362–63.
35. Cicero called Judaism a "barbaric superstition" and its followers a "mob"; Cicero, *Pro Flacco* 67 and 69; Juvenal depicts Jews as beggars and fortune tellers. He asserts that the Sabbath rest demonstrates their laziness; see Juvenal, *Satires* 3.14, 6.542–48, 14.105–6. But for positive views, see Peter Schaefer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 192–95 (attraction and repulsion).
36. La Piana, "Foreign Groups," 390–91.
37. As cited in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Anchor Bible Doubleday, 1993), 30.
38. Suetonius, *Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Claudii Vita* 25.4; see Stephen Benko, "The Edict of Claudius of A.D. 49 and the Instigator Chrestus," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 25/6 (1969): 407.
39. See Daniele Foraboschi, *Onomasticum alterum papyrologicum* (Milan: Istituto Editoriale Cisalpino, 1971), 342.
40. See W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 41; see also Leslie W. Barnard, "The Early Roman Church, Judaism, and Jewish-Christianity," *Anglican Theological Review* 49/4 (1967): 371–84; Jules L. Moreau, "Rome and the New Testament—Another Look," *Biblical Research* 10 (1965): 34–43; Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 100–101.
41. James G. D. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 795, 800.
42. Günther Bornkamm, "The Letter to the Romans as Paul's Last Will and Testament," in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), 25.
43. Francis Watson, *Paul, Judaism, and the Gentiles: A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 97.
44. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 552.
45. Watson, *Paul*, 94–95, identifies the "weak" as Jewish Christians who were applying old Jewish customs for Jews who were living in gentile surroundings and could not find "clean" food (see Daniel 1:8–16; Judges 12:1; and Esther 14:17 LXX). Thus Romans 14:2 might very well be speaking of the Jewish-Christians who had been expelled from the synagogue. The issue is not just kosher law, but incorrectly slaughtered meat, offered to idols in the gentile sector; this explains "eateth herbs [vegetables]" (Romans 14:2); see also Charles K. Barrett, "Things Sacrificed to Idols," in *Essays on Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 42; Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 799–801.
46. Wolfgang Wiefel, "The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity," in *Romans Debate*, 113.

47. See George La Piana, "The Roman Church at the End of the Second Century," *Harvard Theological Review* 18 (1925): 201–77.