

# The Formation of the First “Christian Congregations” in Rome in the Context of the Jewish Congregations<sup>1</sup>

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## 1

When one wants to talk about the beginnings of the “Christ-faith” in Rome, one generally talks about the beginnings of a “Christian congregation” there. In the title of our essay we have followed this convention. Right from the start, however, we would like to draw attention to this terminology as an anachronism. It is, of course, true that believers in Christ were recognized at an early stage by those outside as a separate group, and thus could become victims of measures taken by the Romans in the course of their power politics. In our opinion, this happened at the latest under Nero. But the term “Christians” (Χριστιανοί; Lat. *Chrestiani* or *Christiani*) only became tangible in documents after the year 70 (Acts 11:26; Tacitus, *Ann.* 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2).<sup>2</sup> Of note is the fact that in the reference by Suetonius to the Claudius edict<sup>3</sup> (“As

1. A paper read on 10 August 1993 in the course of the seminar “NT Texts in Their Cultural Environment” from the meeting of the SNTS in Chicago. The initial feedback from Dr. Jim Jeffers and the following discussion set a number of new emphases.

2. M. Karrer, *Der Gesalbte. Die Grundlagen des Christustitels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 81ff.

3. *Claudius* 25.4; according to M. Hengel, *Zur urchristlichen Geschichtsschreibung*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1984), 91, Augustine’s reference (*Ep.* 102.8) that the “law of the Jews” had come to Rome under Caligula is to “the Jewish sect of the Christians.”

the Jews under their leader Chrestos were continually causing unrest, he expelled them from Rome”), the believers in Christ were reckoned ethnically and religiously as belonging totally to the Jews. We shall come back to this text, but would like to point out already that Suetonius, in any case, does not mention any “Christians” under Claudius in Rome. We certainly agree with those scholars who assume that *Chrestus* is the same as *Christus* here, i.e., Jesus (Christ). On the basis of Suetonius’s note, we can thus assume that under Claudius there were already adherents to the “Christ-faith” in Rome. M. Stern is nevertheless right when he writes, “However, the words of Suetonius could convey the impression that Christus himself was present in Rome at that time, and that the disturbances were instigated by him personally, while Tacitus, indeed, was better informed on the whereabouts of Christus.”<sup>4</sup> Suetonius first mentions *Christiani* under Nero, but the “Christ-faith” or followers of Christ already under Claudius. This explains, once again, why it is advisable to be cautious with the use of the term “Christian” when referring to the beginnings of the “Christ-faith” in Rome. It also has consequences for any sociological assessment. For if the note by Suetonius is correct, then the beginnings of the “Christ-faith” in Rome must be looked for within the bounds of the Jewish community. We shall demonstrate a little further on that this assumption can be related well to Romans 16 and Acts 18. In the following we shall also refrain from using the term “heathen Christians,” much less the term “Jewish Christians.” We would, rather, endeavor to show that the beginnings of the “Christ-faith” in Rome must be understood in the context of the encounter between Jews and non-Jews in Rome, an encounter which had already been taking place over a longer period of time. From this assumption we would thus formulate our thesis: Non-Jews in Rome only came into contact, initially, with the “Christ-faith” if they had already come into contact with Jews, and therefore lived as proselytes or God-fearers in more or less close communication with the Jewish community.

4. M. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1974-84), 2:116.

According to Valerius Maximus,<sup>5</sup> Jews were expelled from the city in 139 B.C.E., so there must have been Jews in Rome at least since the middle of the second century B.C.E. It is, however, not certain how reliable his statement is. A sure date is 63 B.C.E., when Pompey conquered Palestine. As a result many Jews were forced to emigrate, or were sold as slaves, and thus ended up, among other places, in Rome. The first Jews in Rome could therefore have been prisoners of war or slaves. The widespread assumption that Jews also came to Rome as merchants cannot be verified. Moreover, it is based on problematic conceptions regarding ancient long-distance trade. Numerous slaves were soon set free and settled in Trastevere, where others from the East had also settled. It is also there that we find the oldest Jewish cemetery in Rome, which was discovered by Bosio in 1602. The Coemeterium Monteverde is situated on the right-hand side of the Tiber before the Porta Portuensis; its beginnings could well reach back to the first century C.E.<sup>6</sup> Philo writes in *Embassy to Gaius* 155, 157, that Augustus "knew that a large area of Rome beyond the river Tiber, had been taken over and inhabited by Jews. Most of them were Roman slaves who had been given their liberty, after having been brought as prisoners of war to Italy . . . he [Augustus] neither expelled them from Rome nor took away their Roman citizenship" (τὴν Ρωμαϊκὴν αὐτῶν πολιτείαν). According to Juvenal, Jews settled as beggars in the vicinity of the Nymphæum of the spring-nymph Egeria, situated in front of the Porta Capena to the southeast (*Saturnalia* 3.12-16). Three Jewish cemeteries near the Via Appia, although probably only laid out in the third century C.E., would seem to indicate this area as well.<sup>7</sup> Epigraphic proof for synagogues on the Campus Martius and

5. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1:358; Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995 [1960]); H. Wolff, "Die Juden im antiken Rom," in *Minderheiten im Mittelmeerraum*, ed. K. Rother (Passau: Passavia Universitätsverlag, 1989), 35-62, here 37-38.

6. R. Penna, "Les Juifs à Rome, au temps de l'apôtre Paul," *NTS* 28 (1982): 321-47, here 326.

7. P. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1989), 27; cf. H. Lichtenberger, "Josephus und Paulus in Rom. Juden und Christen in Rom zur Zeit Neros," in D.-A. Koch and H. Lichtenberger, *Begegnungen zwischen Christentum und Judentum in Antike und Mittelalter. Festschrift für Heinz Schreckenberg* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 245-61, here 247-48.

the Subura stems from a later period. In summary, it is certain that in the first century C.E. there were Jews living in Trastevere, between Porta Collina and Porta Esquilina, as well as in front of Porta Capena.<sup>8</sup>

A quick glance should be taken at the sources relating to the history of the Jews in Rome. Penna divides them into four groups: (1) Authors before Paul: Cicero, Horace, Ovid, Valerius Maximus, Philo; their opinion of the Jews, apart from Philo, of course, tends to be tainted negatively or expressed in an ironic manner. (2) Contemporaries of Paul: Seneca, Persius, Petronius, Quintilian, Martial, Juvenal, Flavius Josephus; with the exception of Flavius Josephus, these authors also write in a somewhat sarcastic tone. (3) Later authors: Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius; M. Stern suspects, especially with regard to Tacitus, that his severely anti-Jewish polemic is the reaction of a conservative patrician against the diffusion of Jewish conceptions even into upper-class Roman society.<sup>9</sup> (4) Epigraphic material: this originates for the most part from the seven presently known Roman catacombs, which only go back, however, to the third century at the earliest.

Statements about the number of Jews in Rome at the time of Paul can be nothing more than estimates. Important leads are given in Josephus (*Ant.* 17.299-303; cf. *War* 2.80), who says that in 4 B.C.E. eight thousand Roman Jews accompanied a Jewish delegation from Palestine to appear before Augustus. According to another report, four thousand Jews capable of taking up arms were deported to Sardinia under Tiberius (Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36; Josephus, *Ant.* 18.81-84; cf. Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.85).<sup>10</sup> These figures allow for a guess that there were around twenty thousand Jews in Rome at the time of Nero.<sup>11</sup> We know nothing about the social composition and

8. Lampe, 28.

9. M. Stern, "Sympathy for Judaism in Roman Senatorial Circles in the Period of the Early Empire," *Zion* 29 (1964): 155-67 (Hebrew). J. G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

10. Wolff, 39-40.

11. The estimates range between fifteen thousand and fifty thousand. H. Solin, "Juden und Syrer im westlichen Teil der römischen Welt: Eine ethnisch-demographische Studie mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der sprachlichen Zustände," *ANRW* II.29.2 (Berlin, 1983), 587-789 and 1222-49, here 700, mentions the number fifteen thousand. Wolff, 39-41, reckons as probable numbers between twenty-five thousand and thirty thousand.

level of education within these Jewish communities. From general considerations of social history,<sup>12</sup> it would seem probable that the Jews were considered lower-class citizens, although they may have had sympathizers among non-Jews even up into the Roman upper class.<sup>13</sup>

3

The immediate context in which Paul, as well as early Christianity in general, can be situated historically is the "diffusion" of Diaspora Jews within a society dominated by a non-Jewish majority. Menachem Stern, Shimon Applebaum, and John Gager, among others, have described accurately the process which took place in the first century C.E. of pagan conflict with the Jewish way of life, a conflict marked by antipathy as well as sympathy.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, Paul was relegated by this conflict to a life on the borderline, with his own peculiar dialectic of limitation and openness which had an effect on both sides. For, as in a Roman majority-ruled society the reaction to the Jewish minority was not only characterized by indifference, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism but also by interest, even to the point of the forming of a circle of sympathizers by the so-called God-fearers and some converts (proselytes), so amongst Jews there was an exceedingly wide and differentiated spectrum of reaction. It reaches, in a parallel manner, from apostasy (i.e., the conversion of some to the Roman way of life; Tiberius Alexander, Philo's nephew, is a well-known example), through more or less extensive acculturation (as, for instance, in Hellenistic Jews of the Diaspora) or an attitude of indifference, to aggressive antipaganism derived from bitter, historical experience of oppression and persecution.<sup>15</sup>

12. Cf. E. Stegemann and W. Stegemann, *Urchristliche Sozialgeschichte. Die Anfänge im Judentum und die Christusgemeinden in der mediterranen Welt* (Stuttgart, 1995), 249ff.

13. Under Domitian, Titus Flavius Clemens, a relative of the emperor, was sentenced to death for atheism and inertia (cf. Suetonius, *Domitian* 15.1). Was Clemens a God-fearer?

14. Cf. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*; Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*; S. Applebaum, *Jews and Greeks in Ancient Cyrene* (Leiden, 1979).

15. H. Frohnhofen, ed., *Christlicher Antijudaismus und jüdischer Antipaganismus. Ihre Motive und Hintergründe in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Hamburg: Steinmann & Steinmann, 1990).

One can find at the same time very different theoretical definitions of the relationship between Judaism and paganism, as well as different practical types of behavior toward non-Jews.

It now seems little more than a truism that early Christianity was a product of this diffusion of Judaism into a society dominated by non-Jews. Its origins, to be sure, lie in an apocalyptic esoteric movement within Palestinian Judaism. However, it gained its effective historical form, theologically and socially, in the tension-filled encounter between Jews and non-Jews in the Mediterranean urban centers. Indeed, it seems reasonable to say that the "Christian" movement, as it was named in the final quarter of the first century, at the latest, to distinguish it from the Jews, was a new, self-supporting, although somewhat unstable form of reaction to the encounter between Jews and pagans. In substance it could perhaps best be characterized as a messianic-apocalyptic and charismatic movement in the gray area between Jews, proselytes, and God-fearers. The instability of the movement can be demonstrated, for instance, in the fact that members of the Galatian congregations, which were founded by Paul, had obviously taken, or were intending to take, the path already laid out for God-fearers of conversion to Judaism, whereas in Rome, in a congregation not founded by Paul, exactly the opposite tendency of disassociation from and theological disqualification of the Jews seemed to be at work (Romans 9-11; 14-15). Moreover, there were very different viewpoints concerning these things amongst the Judeo-Christian missionaries. Once again the epistle to the Galatians, but also Philippians and perhaps 2 Corinthians, reveal that Paul had to deal with apostles in his own congregations who favored conversion to Judaism. This conflict, as is well known, determined at a very early stage his relationships with Peter and Barnabas and the early apostles in Jerusalem. Paul, it would seem, had a disposition for involvement in the formation of this new movement. Although a Hellenistically acculturated Jew of the Diaspora, he was indifferent neither to his Jewish identity nor to a society dominated by a majority of non-Jews. His great commitment to his origins reveals itself, not least, in the fact that according to his own record he shared in the Pharisaic observance of the Torah. Whether that means that he was a member of a Pharisaic group and possibly received a Jewish education in Jerusalem, as we are told in Acts, is a matter of controversy, though here of little importance. Decisive is his undisputed self-identification with his Judaism. This showed itself before his calling, with regard to non-Jews, in that he tended to advise sympathizers to convert

rather than to keep the intermediate identity of God-fearers. This, it would seem, is to be taken from Galatians 5:11, where Paul says that in earlier days he had been "preaching circumcision." Presumably it is also in the background of his initially highly critical reaction to the missionary activities of the older Jesus movement amongst non-Jews. After his call, Paul obviously decided that the God-fearers, who had come to faith in Christ, should not convert to Judaism. The reason for this is most likely found in the fact that he saw the existence of the believer in Christ already shaped by the pneumatic gift from heaven of adoption as a child of God, an adoption which transcended every historical identity (*κατὰ σάρκα*) and thus also that of the Jews. Believers in Christ are, through the power of the Spirit, already the seed of Abraham in eschatological quality and legitimacy (cf. Galatians 3). Thus it is understandable why Paul stands up against the tendency to conversion in Galatia, while opposing the tendency to disassociation from the Jews or the context of the synagogue in Rome. The especially remarkable thing about the epistle to the Romans is that Paul calls both Jews and non-Jews to a mutual association with each other (Rom. 15:7-13). In any case, he opposes theological positions that deduce the rejection of Israel from the nonacceptance of the "Christ-faith" by (the majority of) the Jews; cf. Romans 11:1-24.

4

The oldest document which testifies to the "Christ-faith" in Rome is Paul's epistle to the Romans.<sup>16</sup> Written in the second half of the 50s,<sup>17</sup> this epistle presupposes that there are *κλητοὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* (Rom. 1:6) in Rome. The question is, Who are these "called of Jesus Christ" and in what type of social form do they express their faith in Christ? Paul would lead us, in Romans, to understand these *κλητοὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ* as belonging to the *ἔθνη*, as he reckons them in Romans 1:5, to be within the sphere of his apostleship. This apostleship is described quite specifically in verse 5 as leading to obedience that comes from faith among all the *ἔθνη*. The *κλητοὶ*

16. A. J. M. Wedderburn, *The Reasons for Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988).

17. For a Pauline chronology see R. Jewett, *A Chronology of Paul's Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ are then counted in verse 6 amongst these ἔθνη. It can also be deduced from other passages that non-Jews are being addressed in the epistle. Above all we would make reference to Romans 9–11, and there specifically 11:13: Ὑμῖν δὲ λέγω τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. ἐφ' ὅσον μὲν οὖν εἰμι ἐγὼ ἔθνων ἀπόστολος, τὴν διακονίαν μου δοξάζω.

Alongside that, the passage in Romans 7:1 should be noted, which regards those receiving the epistle as people who know the *nomos*. This means that here either Jews are being addressed or Paul is speaking to non-Jews with regard to their knowledge of the Torah. Such knowledge of the Torah by non-Jews can, however, only be presupposed if they had, in turning to the Jewish religion, become God-fearers. We assume that God-fearing non-Jews are indeed meant in Romans 7:1. At the same time we would not exclude the possibility that Paul knew Jews, male or female, in Rome who were believers in Christ. This would, in any case, seem to follow from Romans 16. We agree with recent research that this chapter — probably with the exception of the polemic against heretics and the doxology — originally belonged to the epistle.<sup>18</sup> Paul here gives his regards to the married couple Prisca and Aquila, who were Jews (Acts 18:2; 18:26; 1 Cor. 16:19; 2 Tim. 4:19). In addition, in the list of those to be greeted, Andronicus, Junia, and Herodion are specifically indicated as being Jews (Rom. 16:7, 11). We do not rule out the possibility that there were other Jews, male or female, on the list of those to be greeted, although we cannot state it with any certainty. Perhaps the names Mary and Aristobulus<sup>19</sup> could point to this. We hold, therefore, that there were Jews, male and female, amongst those who believed in Christ in Rome.

The question now, however, is how Paul can reckon the κλητοὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as belonging to the ἔθνη if there really were male and female Jews amongst the Roman believers in Christ. First of all, we presume that quantitatively there were clearly more non-Jews making up the numbers of the believers in Rome. Moreover, it is important that we put aside certain conceptions concerning the organization of those believers. There is no evidence at all of any organized structure of a church composed of Jews

18. Cf. recently J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B (Waco: Word, 1988), 884ff.

19. H.-J. Klauck, *Hausgemeinde und Hauskirche im frühen Christentum* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelstudien, 1981), 28, thinks Aristobulus did not belong to the believers in Christ.

and non-Jews, in the sense that, similar to the organization of synagogues, different offices, a constitution, and something identifiable as a body of members could be found. Rather, the mention of a house church in Romans 16:5, and that especially in regard to the couple Aquila and Prisca, would seem to lead to the conclusion that those who believed in Christ met together in various house churches in Rome.<sup>20</sup> The analogy that 1 Corinthians 16:19 obviously assumes for Ephesus would seem to point to this as well, once again hardly accidentally connected with the names Aquila and Prisca. House churches would also have existed in Corinth.<sup>21</sup> Whether these house churches were made up of a mixed group of Jews and non-Jews, we cannot state with any certainty. Admittedly the problems reflected in Romans 14–15 seem to point to a certain amount of social interaction between Jews and non-Jews amongst the believers in Christ.<sup>22</sup> We must therefore reckon with the fact that at the time of the sending of the epistle to the Romans, there existed no concrete social form of any uniformly organized Christian congregation, apart from loosely organized house churches. The observation that the early Roman church at the turn of the first century had a presbyterial constitution points in the same direction. This fits the conclusion that there was at the time no central meeting place for all the Christians in Rome, but that there existed a number of house churches. Later on these may have been topographically identical with churches carrying the same titles. Roman Christianity developed a monarchical structure only at a much later date.

Having then posed the question of how Paul came to reckon the "called of Jesus Christ" in Rome as belonging to the ἔθνη, we must now juxtapose this with the fact that, according to Acts 18:2 and Suetonius, *Claudius* 25.4, there is no mention of non-Jews with regard to the followers of Christ. We are of the opinion that the Claudius edict was the cause of the development of the "Christ-faith" in Rome, ascertainable in the epistle to the Romans. Our assumptions with regard to the Claudius edict are the following: (1) The edict is most probably to be dated to 49 C.E. (as the

20. Klauck, 26-30; Lampe, 301ff.

21. G. Theissen, "Social Stratification in the Corinthian Community: A Contribution to the Sociology of Early Hellenistic Christianity," in *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 69-119; Stegemann and Stegemann, 231ff.

22. Cf. the detailed discussion of these chapters in K. P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate*, 2nd ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991).

tradition according to Orosius has it)<sup>23</sup> and not to 41 C.E. (as Dio Cassius has it). Acts 18:2 would also seem to indicate 49 C.E. (2) Further, we hold that, contrary to Acts 18:2, not all the Jews in Rome<sup>24</sup> were expelled. (3) We assume that all the sources — Acts, Suetonius, Dio Cassius (although he may have meant a different measure in the year 41), and Orosius — refer to the same event.

If, however, Aquila and Prisca came to Corinth as a consequence of the Claudius edict, the question must be asked: To what degree was the edict actually carried out? Were, for instance, only "ringleaders" expelled? Or was the edict adjourned after a number of initial expulsions? Or does Luke, in Acts 18:2, mean all Jews believing in Christ when he writes "all the Jews"?<sup>25</sup> We suggest that the latter interpretation should seriously be taken into consideration.

In any case, the Claudius edict presupposes that at the end of the 40s there were conflicts amongst Jews about Christ, which made police measures necessary. These conflicts could only have developed, of course, if the Jews who believed in Christ had already had a certain resonance within the synagogues or within the associated circles of God-fearers. Suetonius appears to have had such a course of events in mind. Assuming that our suggestion for an interpretation of Acts 18:2 is correct, there would only have been believers in Christ from the ranks of God-fearers left in Rome after the expulsion of those Jews who believed in Christ. But even if a few Jewish believers in Christ had been able to remain in Rome, we can assume that the relationship between the believers in Christ and the synagogues was very tense, if it had not, indeed, already broken down. In this process, it is quite possible that the synagogues, or those responsible in them, also took measures to distance themselves from those believers in Christ who were remaining in Rome. These traumatic circumstances would seem to supply the background to the theological developments amongst the God-fearing believers in Christ in Rome, the same developments which Paul has to deal with in Romans, especially in chapters 9–11 and 14–15. The possi-

23. Lampe, 7.

24. W. Wiefel, "The Jewish Community in Rome," in *The Romans Debate*, 84–101, takes the view on p. 93 that all the Jews were affected by the imperial expulsion.

25. Stern thinks the edict initially ordered the expulsion of all Jews but was then modified to a ban on all public meetings. See Dio Cassius 60.6.6; Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2:116.

bility cannot be ruled out that, after the return of the Jewish believers in Christ to Rome, new tensions may have sprung up, whose victim Paul himself may possibly have been.<sup>26</sup>

Romans presupposes that believers in Christ who were Jews also returned to Rome after a number of years, amongst them Prisca and Aquila. When Romans 16 emphasizes that they organized a house church in their home in Rome, one could perhaps conclude that they brought their whole house church from Ephesus to Rome with them. Important, though, is the fact that social contacts existed (again) between the "called of Jesus Christ" from the ἐθνῇ and these Jewish believers in Christ.

5

Finally, we must ask the question of how the "Christ-faith" happened to come to Rome at all. Paul certainly did not bring it there. As we can conclude from Romans, Paul had undertaken to evangelize in Rome himself. He was, however, hindered in the execution of his plan, and in the meantime the "Christ-faith" came to be preached there without him. His own intentions, which he communicated in Romans to those addressed, had then changed. Romans, however, also presupposes that Paul and his missionary endeavors in Rome were not unknown. There are indications in Romans 3:8 that certain negative opinions of Paul were well known in Rome.

We can only speculate as to the identity of the person or persons who first brought the "Christ-faith" into the capital city of the empire. In our opinion, it is plausible that either Jewish believers in Christ from Palestine or the Diaspora took up residence in Rome, or that Roman Jews, perhaps in connection with a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, came into contact with the "Christ-faith" and then started propagating it on their return to Rome. No intention of missionary activities by believers in Christ purposely directed toward Rome, apart from Paul's, is known to us.

26. 1 Clement 5-6.