

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE CITY OF ROME

The earliest witness to Christianity in Rome is the epistle of Paul, the apostle, to the Romans (dated about AD 56-57). Next follows Acts 28.15 (dated about AD 62) which records the meeting of Paul and the Christians in Rome. Since Paul states in his epistle that he intended for “many years”¹ to visit these Christians, it is reasonable to assume that the church existed in the Imperial City in the early fifties. The remark of the Roman historian Suetonius in his *Life of Claudius* (xxv.2), written about AD 120, corroborates this point, “Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he (Claudius) expelled them from Rome.”² “Chrestus” is another form of “Christus” or the Latin designation for “Christ,” so Suetonius hardly could have reference to anyone but Jesus. But as C. K. Barrett notes, “Against this view is the profession of the Roman Jews in Acts xxviii.21f. that they had no first-hand knowledge of Paul or of the Church.”³ But although it is true the Jews in Rome had no previous knowledge of Paul or his experiences in Jerusalem, they did possess some information about Christianity. They told Paul, “We desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is

¹The Greek for this phrase in Romans 15.23 is *pollon eton* with the variant reading *hikanon eton* given. The latter is “a more polished substitution for *pollon*, introduced, perhaps by an Alexandrian editor in order to soften the obvious exaggeration of the apostle’s statement.” Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (3rd ed.; New York, NY: United Bible Societies, 1971), 537. The latter could mean for “enough years,” whereas the former would signify “numerous years.” No definite period of time can be drawn from either expression.

²Translated from the Latin *Iudaeas impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes Roma expulit*. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (2nd ed.; London, England: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1320.

³C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries, edited by Henry Chadwick (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1957), 6.

known to us that it is spoken against everywhere” (Acts 28.22). This would confirm rather than deny the presence of Christian believers in Rome. Possibly the Jews in Rome were at odds concerning how to deal with “this sect,” and to any enlightenment that Paul could give they would listen gladly.

Another criticism made against the report of Suetonius is his lack of clarity. This probably is due to his inexact information. Writing about seventy years after the disturbance, Suetonius possibly had some sort of record of Chrestus being the leader of one of the opposing parties. Knowing that Chrestus was the founder of Christianity, “it would seem quite a reasonable inference to him that Chrestus had taken an active part in stirring up these riots.”⁴ Whether or not this antagonism was due to the initial entrance of Christianity into Rome is not clear; however, the good news about Jesus “must have actually spread at that time among the Roman Jews, so that severe struggles arose between the old believers and the Christian believers.”⁵

Although Suetonius gives no date, Orosius, a fifth century Christian historian, dates the edict in the ninth year of Claudius or AD 49.⁶ This would agree with a reference to this expulsion found in Acts 18.2. Having arrived in Corinth (probably in late AD 50),⁷ Paul found

⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, edited by R. V. G. Tasker (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963), 14.

⁵Werner Georg Kummel, *Introduction to the New Testament*, translated by A. J. Mattill, Jr. (14th ed.; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1966), 218.

⁶Gareth L. Reese, *New Testament History: Acts* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1976), xiv.

⁷For the determination of this date by Gallio’s proconsulate and the Delphi inscription, see Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (3rd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 566-67, 662.

Aquila and Priscilla, Jews who recently had come from Italy “because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.” Apparently, Aquila and Priscilla were Christians before they met Paul. Their natural and close affiliation with Paul and their ability to teach others (see Acts 18.3, 19, 26) suggest that they were more than novices. Bruce⁸ has suggested that Paul did not convert Aquila and Priscilla, because he nowhere calls them his “children” in the gospel (see Romans 16.3; 1 Corinthians 16.19; 2 Timothy 4.19; cf. 1 Timothy 1.2; Titus 1.4). Maybe they were converted while in Rome, or perhaps they were among the residents of Pontus (Acts 2.9; 18.2) who heard the gospel preached on Pentecost. To be sure, the time and the place of their conversion is not known.

From the above, it would seem that Christianity existed in Rome prior to AD 49 or very soon thereafter. But *how* and *when* did Christianity initially come to the chief city of the civilized world? Did *one of the apostles* initially evangelize Rome? Paul can be ruled out, since he had not visited Rome prior to his writing these Christians (Romans 1.10-15; 15.22-24). In this respect, the letter of Paul to Rome parallels his epistle to Colossae, because Paul had not visited the Christians of Colossae either (Colossians 2.1). But Paul did feel duty-bound to impart apostolic instruction to the Colossians. He considered *as his very own* the work of Epaphras, who was to Paul “our beloved fellow bond-servant” and “a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf” (Colossians 1.7; 4.12-13). This would seem to have important implications concerning the situation at Rome.

Among the Christians in Rome when Paul wrote were Priscilla, Aquila, and Urbanus, his fellow workers (Romans 16.3, 9). Also in Rome were the following: Mary, Tryphaena,

⁸*Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 15.

Tryphosa, and Persis—laborers in the Lord, although they are not called fellow laborers (Romans 16.6, 12); Andronicus and Junias—former fellow prisoners with Paul and “outstanding among the apostles”⁹ (Romans 16.7); and Epaenetus—the first convert of Paul in the province of Asia (Romans 16.5). Because many of Paul’s workers, companions, and “children” in the Lord had settled in the Imperial City, and because no apostle previously had preached the good news about Jesus in that city, Paul felt a pressing need first to write and then to visit these Christians.

Paul’s remarks in Romans 15.20f. concerning his missionary method seem to imply that Rome was not the evangelistic territory of another apostle. Paul says, “I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was already named, that I might not build upon another man’s foundation” (cf. 1 Corinthians 3.10f.; 2 Corinthians 10.16). Paul had anticipated going to Rome for many years, but he was compelled to preach Christ in the fertile, unevangelized fields to the east. His dedication for a complete and thorough evangelization kept him from Rome for some time. During these intervening years, some of his co-workers and converts and other Christians migrated to Rome in order to work there. But Paul still desired to “preach the gospel” and “obtain some fruit”¹⁰ in Rome (Romans 1.13, 15).

Does this mean that Paul now was abandoning his missionary concept of preaching the gospel on fresh, new fields? Had not Christ already been preached in Rome? Paul makes it plain that his stay in Rome will be temporary, for he aims to go westward to Spain. In the meantime, he would continue to follow his self-imposed missionary rule. But it should be noted that a visit

⁹These two disciples were either well known to the apostles, or they were “apostles” themselves in a wider application of the term.

¹⁰“‘Fruit’ is the result of apostolic labor—the winning of new converts, and the building up of the Church.” Barrett, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 26.

by Paul to Rome would not violate his procedure. The end result or goal of Paul's aspiration to preach Christ in unevangelized regions was "that [Greek *hina*] he might not build upon another man's foundation." The word translated "I aspired" in the New American Standard Version is from the Greek root *philotimeomai* which means "to have as one's ambition."¹¹ This does not mean that Paul would not preach in evangelized areas at all. It means that he would not do so only if another apostle already had established a foundation. This seems to be the force of the *hina* that denotes "purpose, aim, or goal."¹² This guideline previously forced Paul to preach in new areas, because the other apostles were doing their work well. But in Rome, where no apostle had preached, Paul could expound the gospel where Christ already had been named and not violate his ultimate desire to lay an apostolic foundation.¹³ Had another apostle labored in Rome, Paul more than likely would have abandoned his original plan to visit Rome and would not even have written to the Christians there.

What then of the tradition that Peter, the apostle, lived and preached in Rome twenty-five years before his martyrdom? This tradition is recorded first by Jerome who wrote, "Simon Peter came to Rome in the second year of Claudius, and there he occupied the sacerdotal chair during twenty-five years, until the last year of Nero."¹⁴ The duration of twenty-five years seems to be

¹¹William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (4th ed.; Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 869.

¹²*Ibid.*, 377.

¹³Note that Paul did preach upon a prior foundation in Damascus (Acts 9.19b-20) and at Antioch (Acts 11.19-26). But these instances were before his calling to missionary endeavor as recorded in Acts 13.2.

¹⁴Reese, *New Testament History: Acts*, 447, citing Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, chapter I.

Jerome's own addition which has no historical proof, since it is found in no other writers earlier than Jerome himself. Eusebius, who places Peter in Rome during the reign of Claudius,¹⁵ "says nothing about Peter's being bishop of Rome for twenty-five years."¹⁶

The tradition undoubtedly took its rise from the statement of Justin Martyr (*Apology*, I.26) that Simon Magus came to Rome during the reign of Claudius. Tradition, in the time of Eusebius, commonly connected the Roman visits of Simon and of Peter, and consequently Eusebius, accepting the earlier date for Simon's arrival in Rome, quite naturally assumed also the same date for Peter's arrival there, although Justin does not mention Peter in connection with Simon in the passage which Eusebius quotes.¹⁷

The tradition, therefore, is not sustained by the earliest evidence. In fact, in another place, Eusebius says that Peter arrived in Rome at a time later than he previously indicated. He notes, "Peter appears to have preached through Pontus, Galatia, Bithynia, Cappadocia, and Asia, to the Jews that were scattered abroad; who also, finally coming to Rome, was crucified with his head downward."¹⁸

This testimony agrees with that of the earliest writers¹⁹ who place both Peter *and Paul* in Rome in the closing years of Nero's reign (about AD 67-68), and it rules out the possibility of any earlier residency of Peter in Rome. Peter was in Jerusalem in AD 49 (see Acts, chapter 15),

¹⁵Eusebius records, "Under the reign of Claudius, by the benign and gracious providence of God, Peter, that powerful and great apostle, who by his courage took the lead of all the rest, was conducted to Rome . . ." *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, translated by Christian Frederick Cruse (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, n.d.), 64. This visit supposedly coincided with the arrival of Simon Magus in Rome shortly after the death of Herod Agrippa I or about AD 44, the fourth year of Claudius. This conflicts with the date mentioned by Jerome.

¹⁶Reese, *New Testament History: Acts*, 447.

¹⁷Ibid., 448, citing Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

¹⁸*Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 82.

¹⁹For a good treatment of the early testimony to the preaching and martyrdom of both Peter and Paul in Rome, see Reese, *New Testament History: Acts*, 450-451.

in Antioch about AD 50 (see Galatians, chapter 2; cf. Acts 15.35), and possibly in Corinth between AD 50 and AD 55 (see 1 Corinthians 1.12; 9.5). Paul makes no personal mention of Peter in either his epistle to Rome or his letters written from Rome (Ephesians, Colossians, and Philippians—dated about AD 60-62; 2 Timothy—dated about AD 67)—strange indeed, if Peter initially evangelized Rome and lived in the city. The evidence, therefore, points to the conclusion that Peter did not have any role to play in the early establishment of Christianity in Rome, but that certainly “does not exclude the fact that this leading apostle was certainly in Rome and there suffered martyrdom.”²⁰

In the fourth century, the Latin writer who is called “Ambrosiaster” says, in the preface to his commentary on the book of Romans, “The Romans had embraced the faith of Christ, albeit according to the Jewish rite, without seeing any sign of mighty work or any of the apostles.”²¹ If indeed no apostle initially evangelized Rome, then who did? Perhaps “visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes” (Acts 2.10) first brought the gospel to the Imperial City after their conversion on Pentecost (assuming they were among the three thousand baptized). But this theory is weakened by the fact “that ‘every nation under heaven’ (Acts 2.5) could equally well be supposed to have received the gospel early, through the representatives who were present at Pentecost.”²² Rather than disbanding, however, these first believers seemed content to remain in

²⁰Francis Davidson and Ralph P. Martin, “Romans,” *The New Bible Commentary: Revised*, edited by Donald Guthrie and J. A. Motyer (3rd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 1012.

²¹From F. F. Bruce, “Romans, Epistle to the,” *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Vol. V, edited by Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), 149.

²²F. W. Beare, “Rome (Church),” *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV, edited by George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1962), 122.

Jerusalem and enjoy fellowship (Acts 2.41-47; 4.4, 32-35; 6.1), at least until the great persecution recorded in Acts 8.2. If any left Jerusalem and returned to Rome immediately after Pentecost, they possibly would not have gained enough knowledge to establish a church. After a period of time, though, these Jews of the Diaspora in Rome would return to their home and share the good news about Jesus to fellow Jews. As Guthrie notes, “Their knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus would be continually increasing as Christian travelers brought back with them accounts of apostolic preaching and teaching.”²³ And additional fellowship would be gained from “various Christians who had taken up their residence in Rome, many of them being Paul’s converts.”²⁴

No doubt, the first missionary tour of Paul (about AD 47-48) greatly increased the number of Gentile Christians (see Acts 13.48-49; 14.1) who lived near major routes of commerce in the Roman empire. Perhaps an increase of Gentile Christians visiting and settling in Rome ignited the Jewish riots of AD 49 mentioned by Suetonius. But Bruce disagrees and notes, “We may be sure that the original group of believers in Rome consisted entirely of Jewish Christians, and that Claudius’s expulsion order involved its departure and dispersal.”²⁵ However, Bruce cannot prove this assumption. Nevertheless, by about AD 56-57 (i.e., the edict of Claudius lapsed with his death in AD 54), both Jewish (see Romans 2.1f.; 4.1) and Gentile (see Romans 1.13; 11.13; 15.14-18) believers had returned to or initially had come to Rome from various parts of the empire. More detailed information about the origin of Christianity in Rome, that is,

²³Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 394.

²⁴Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), 221.

²⁵Bruce, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, 15.

exactly from whom and when the gospel first spread to the Imperial City, may perhaps never be known for sure.

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