



Inside the catacombs of Callixtus in Rome. Over 12 miles long, this system of catacombs contains the remains of countless believers plus 16 popes and numerous martyrs.



BY KENDELL EASLEY

# JEWISH AND GENTILE BELIEVERS IN ROME

**R**OMANS 14–15 RECORDS Paul’s counsel to “weak” and “strong” believers in the imperial capital. He set up enduring guidelines Christians have followed ever since—with greater or lesser degrees of success—about handling “doubtful issues” (Rom. 14:1).<sup>1</sup> These are moral questions about which believers sincerely disagree. The apostle used two examples of current interest to his first readers: dietary restrictions and holy days. In both cases, the issue focused on religious significance, not health benefits. In both cases, Jewish regulations were likely the source of the clash. Yet many Gentiles who converted to Christianity surely brought baggage regarding foods and observance of special days from their previous pagan religious practices. This article reviews how Judaism came to Rome, considers the effect of Claudius’s expulsion edict, considers how Christianity came to Rome, and concludes with what we learn from a close reading of Romans.

## Judaism Comes to Rome

In the mid-second century B.C., the Maccabean Revolt of the Jews against the hated Seleucids resulted in a politically independent Judea. The Roman Senate established diplomatic relations with the Hasmonean kingdom of the Jews, resulting in Jewish delegates being sent to live in Rome. This trickle expanded greatly after Judea was made a Roman province in the decades before Jesus’ birth. Scholars have estimated 40,000 to 60,000 Jews lived in Rome by the beginning of Christianity. Information concerning Jews in Rome comes from literary sources as well as archaeological studies of Jewish catacombs in Rome.<sup>2</sup>

In A.D. 19, a scandal in the Jewish community caused the Emperor Tiberius to expel Jews from Rome temporarily. What happened was that four Jews persuaded a rich Roman proselyte to Judaism to make a large gift to the Jerusalem temple, but they misappropriated the funds. This disgrace perhaps lay behind Paul’s comment in Romans 2:24 about the name of Israel’s God being blasphemed by pagans because of how Jews behaved.<sup>3</sup>



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### Claudius's Expulsion of Jews

When Paul arrived in Corinth, “he found a Jewish man named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome” (Acts 18:2). The verse points to an event the Roman historian Suetonius also documented.<sup>4</sup> A later historian calculated it to Claudius’s ninth year (essentially A.D. 49).<sup>5</sup> Suetonius recorded that the emperor’s edict was based on disturbances among the Jews instigated by “Chrestus.” The identity of Chrestus has long been a matter of scholarly debate. However, one can reasonably argue that Suetonius was confused (or misspelled) and really meant “Christus,” the Latin spelling for Christ.

If this interpretation is accurate, Christianity arrived in Rome by A.D. 49. A likely scenario is that Jewish Christians, in the course of business travel, carried the gospel to Rome and successfully evangelized in

**Above: Ruins at the forum in Rome.**

**Right: Marble tombstone from the Vigna Randanini Jewish catacomb in Rome; dated 2nd–3rd centuries A.D. An inscription, now erased, was originally in the rectangle above the menorah.**



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ JEWISH MUSEUM/ NEW YORK (359/15)

its synagogues, possibly taking their cue from Paul’s methods. (Jews from Rome had been present on Pentecost [Acts 2:10], but we have no evidence they evangelized in Rome.) Among these Jewish converts to Christianity in Rome were Aquila and Priscilla.

Inevitably certain synagogue leaders spoke adamantly against the message that the Messiah had arrived in the person of Jesus, the crucified Nazarene. Claudius would have seen the Jews who took the lead in making the case for Christ in the same negative light that Paul was seen.

Paul’s accusers later before Felix said the apostle was “an agitator among all the Jews throughout the Roman world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes!” (Acts 24:5). This accusation may have well been an echo of the trouble in Rome over “Chrestus.”<sup>6</sup>

How successful was Claudius in enforcing his edict? Expelling 40,000 to 60,000 persons would have been a massive social dislocation. Perhaps proportionately few Jews—especially believers such as Aquila and Priscilla—actually fled the city, while

# CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

A.D. 49

Claudius expelled Jews from Rome.

54

Claudius died; Nero became Rome's next emperor.

57

Early A.D. 57; Paul composed Romans from Corinth.

59

A.D. 57-59; Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea

60

Paul arrived in Rome after the shipwreck.

the others lay low. In any case, the edict expired at Claudius's death in A.D. 54. The edict, however, effectively stopped Christian evangelism among Jews in Rome. Yet by the time Paul arrived there as a prisoner, little more than a decade after the edict, the Jewish community was once again flourishing (Acts 28:17-28).

## Christianity Comes to Rome

Despite long-standing tradition that Simon Peter planted the church in Rome and became its first bishop, historical evidence is sorely lacking. As we have observed, Jewish believers—if not churches—were in Rome by A.D. 49, and in that year Peter was still active in Jerusalem (Acts 15). Nothing indicates he had

**Below:** Overlooking the Ajalon Valley in central Israel; on the horizon is Modiin, which was the home of the Maccabees.

**Right:** Seleucid coin; obverse depicts Antiochus IV; reverse depicts a tree with griffins. Antiochus's trying to rid Jerusalem of any signs of Judaism—including his taking over the

temple, bringing in Hellenistic gods, and reversing circumcisions—was the final straw that led to the First Jewish (or "Maccabean") Revolt.



traveled any farther than Antioch by this date.

The following is a likely scenario, based essentially on the evidence of Acts and Romans:

*The Jewish birth of Christianity in Rome*—By A.D. 49, the gospel had penetrated Rome, at least in some Jewish synagogues. Whether entire synagogues had become Christian or not—Jewish churches in effect—is unknown. Christian evangelism generated so much commotion among these Jews that Claudius issued his edict.

*The Gentile expansion of the churches in Rome*—Although Jewish society disappeared or went underground in Rome from A.D. 49 until Claudius's death in A.D. 54, the gospel kept making inroads among Rome's Gentiles. Paul kept up with news of the Roman Christians from travelers he encountered. By the time he wrote Romans, he had developed an intense desire to visit Rome and preach there. "I want very much to see you," he wrote, also adding, "I often planned to come to you (but was prevented until now)" (Rom. 1:11,13). Thus, Paul's repeated theological statement in Romans, that the gospel was "first to the Jew, and also to the Greek" (1:16; 2:9), was also chronologically true for the church in Rome.

*The enrichment of the churches by Paul*—See the next section of this article for what Paul's letter (A.D. 57) reveals about the relationship between Jew and Gentile believers in Rome.

*Paul's reception by Christians in Rome*—Acts 28:15-16 indicates the believers of Rome went to meet and welcome Paul before he arrived in the city proper, early in A.D. 60. His epistle had been well received. Yet Acts 28:17-28 indicates the non-Christian Jews of Rome had no knowledge of Paul. Further, they proved unreceptive to his presentation of Jesus as the Messiah. He declared that evangelism in Rome would henceforth concentrate on Gentiles (Acts 28:28). This strongly implies that from A.D. 60 onward, Christianity in Rome became increasingly Gentile. Evangelism among Jews had largely ceased.

## What We Learn from Reading Romans

*Romans 1-3: The need of Jews and Gentiles alike for salvation*—Here Paul made the case for universal sin. He targeted the Jewish need, often speaking in the abstract or generically of "the Jew" (1:16; 2:9-10; 3:1) or "a Jew" (2:17,28,29). He targeted the Gentile need, writing generically of "the Greek" (1:16; 2:9-10) or "Gentiles"



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (25/3/3)

**Left: At Antioch of Pisidia, first-century believers built the Church of Saint Peter out of a**

**cliff. Although the façade was added in the eleventh century, the inside dates to the first century.**

(2:14,24). Because Paul was making a theological argument valid for all times and places, his discussion in these chapters reveals nothing about contemporary relationships among racially divergent believers in Rome.

*Romans 4-8: God's provision of salvation*—Paul avoided ethnic terms in this section of the letter. When he referred to Jews, he used “circumcised,” a reference more to a religious ritual than to an ethnic group (4:9-12). Racial considerations were irrelevant in Paul's development of “justification” and “sanctification.”

*Romans 9-11: Israel's future*—Here Paul preferred using the term “Israel” over any form of the term “Jew” (9:6,27,31; 10:19,21; 11:2,7,11,25-26). His teaching about election and his belief that Israel's rejection by God was neither total nor final was vital for all readers, whatever their ethnicity. These chapters thus reveal nothing about the racial relationships in Rome's churches.

*Romans 12:1-15:13: Application to Christian living*—Striking indeed that in this section in which Paul was explaining how Christian relationships are to work, the apostle avoided ethnic terms (Jew, Greek, Gentile,

and the like). We of today are left to sort out for ourselves the extent to which the Jew-Gentile situation lay behind the apostle's advice on helping the “strong” and “weak” get along. The only ethnic references in these chapters are limited to 15:7-13, the final challenge within the body of the letter for “circumcised” (15:8) and “Gentiles” (vv. 8-12) to glorify God together.

*Romans 15:14-16:27: The letter's conclusion*—When Paul referred to “the Gentiles” in this section (15:16,18,27; 16:4), he was no longer referring to them generically. Rather, he had in mind (1) specific Gentile converts to whom he had ministered as an apostle and (2) their spiritual descendants. In this section, Paul referred to Jewish Christians mainly as “the saints” (15:26,31).

In 16:3-16, Paul greeted Christians of five house churches (16:5,10,11,14,15). He mentioned 26 individuals, naming 24. Of these, the Jews numbered five: Aquila and Priscilla, now back in Rome (v. 3); Andronicus and Junia (v. 7); and Herodion (v. 11).<sup>7</sup> The rest were Gentile. If this ratio of 5:21 is projected, then about a fifth of the Christians in Rome were Jewish.

(Of secondary interest is the gender diversity—nine women—and the social diversity, from those with slave names to those who were homeowners and even possibly members of the nobility.)<sup>8</sup> Despite this diversity, the list suggests Roman believers considered themselves a fundamental unity. They were all “in Christ” (vv. 3,7,9,10) and “in the Lord” (vv. 8,11,12,13). They were part of the same family as “brothers” (v. 14) and were persons Paul considered “dear friends” (or “beloved,” KJV; vv. 5,8,9,12). Even though doing so would have been natural, evidently these Christians did not worship in separate groups segregated by ethnicity, gender, or social class.

The picture emerges showing that the Roman house churches did not tolerate ethnic division. Believers could not accept one another and glorify the Lord with one voice if they did so (15:6-7). The Christians in Rome were not a perfect church, but they exemplified the apostolic teaching of unity in diversity. **B**

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).

2. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 380-81.

3. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.3.5.

4. Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25.4.

5. John B. Polhill, *Acts*, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 382.

6. Paul was imprisoned in Caesarea Maritima A.D. 57-59. After Felix heard Paul in A.D. 57, he left him in prison two more years. Festus replaced Felix in A.D. 59. Once in power, Festus heard Paul's case and sent him to Rome. Dates, including those in the chronology on page 9, are based on Bruce.

7. John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 395.

8. *Ibid.*

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