

Early Believers in Rome – Attempt to Reconstruct the Events

File: EarlyBelievers.pdf
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Date: May 9,2009
Version: 1.0

The following account represents a reconstruction of the earliest history of the Church with a focus on the Gentiles' experience preceding Paul's letter to the Romans believers.

By the time of Christ, Rome had quite a diversity of beliefs and cultures operating among the various synagogues. One of the general requirements, representing some of the continuity, was that the synagogue could form only upon the consent of ten qualified men. (Wiefel).

Some aspects of Judaism would likely have remained consistent for example the many issues and discussions about the requirements of the Law (the Law of Moses and Jewish Law, in general). Certain separationist, or at least distinct, behaviors also would set the general Hebrew man apart from the Greek, namely the avoidance of meat sacrificed to idols and the rest taken on the Sabbath days. Overall Judaism was seen by Roman Greeks as mythology.

Such diversity provided fertile ground for the time that Jews would start hearing news about Christ Jesus. Likely various people such as travelers, teachers, and leaders brought various news and ideas from Jerusalem back to Rome. Some Jews in Rome may also have been baptized by John. In some limited numbers, the more devout Jews, if of sufficient means and determination, made an occasional pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. More often than not these pilgrims would be the more strict adherents of Judaism among the inhabitants of Rome. Of course though there would be many Pharisees that would have treated Roman Jews with disdain, as being away from the purity of Jerusalem, nevertheless these Roman Jews would be devout followers.

The synagogues in Rome could likely accept teachings and then also give some assent to the rebukes of John the Baptist, as heard through the reports of teachers and travelers who had made it to Jerusalem or who passed on the current news. The same may be said of news about Jesus. It would be curious to consider which news was most popularly disseminated.

At the time of the Passover when Jesus died and was raised, one could imagine the discussions and controversies among the people in Jerusalem. There may have been pilgrims from Rome. Its interesting to consider that many people were around Jerusalem weeks (40 days??) after the Passover. Did these travelers (from any distance) stay around Jerusalem because of the interest in the traditional observance of Pentecost or were many curious about the news and rumors about Jesus being the Christ and being raised from the dead? Scripture shows that the Apostles and remaining disciples had encounters with Jesus after His resurrection but its uncertain how much the general inhabitants of and visitors to Jerusalem heard.

On the Day of Pentecost then many heard the preaching and saw the events and repented. The first day three thousand souls were saved. Many were inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judea and a good portion were Jews from long distances. Any of these people, and most of

them, likely were to be celebrating new life in Christ by going door to door. Many plans were disrupted that day and in subsequent days as more Jews (and proselytes) repented.

Now the followers of Christ were essentially only Jews. Eventually some people from Jerusalem would make it to Rome having repented themselves, whether at the Day of Pentecost or in subsequent days. Maybe it was the leaders among them or just from the zeal of the new followers of Christ, still being seen as just a sect of Judaism, that led to a movement among Roman Jews to follow Jesus, but whichever way a church formed in Rome. When speaking of a Church in Rome, really what is meant is that there were Jewish followers of Christ, not that there was a Church building or anything distinct of a Church today. Likely the believers, as being a Church, were simply attending a synagogue that either accepted or accommodated the followers of Christ. Possibly new synagogues were formed for such was the only familiar manner of assemblies among most Jews, apart from the Temple. The diversity in Rome created a situation where if one synagogue didn't accept followers of Christ another would.

Initially the believers met without resistance and followed most of the traditions of their previous form of Judaism. Two elements come to play here. There was no formal modes of teaching to impart the new doctrines to those in Rome. Secondly, Rome was far from the oversight of the Apostles. Gentiles had not specifically been reached with the gospel yet. It was at least another five years before Gentiles were really converting and a while longer before Paul was evangelizing.

So the followers of Christ in Rome were in synagogues detached much from any intrusions or instruction or controversy (e.g. any controversy that would occur for including Gentiles). There would be an interesting mix of Law and grace for the early followers in Rome. Circumcision was seen as a requirement, as learned from the later event in Jerusalem, on the question whether Gentiles should be circumcised. In this mix there also could be the excitement of the new experience in Christ plus the fellowship of believers that might be inspired by the Spirit.

Gentiles Added

At some point the synagogues of the believers started to have Gentile believers. This might have been more noticeable by about AD40 (estimated), still before Paul's greater missionary work.

These believers could have been drawn by the evangelism of Jewish believers. Maybe more had traveled to Rome from areas where Gentiles were first becoming believers. The composition isn't clear yet – were most followers from among the educated, the citizens, or from among the servants and slaves.

Such adherents of Judaism lived in a mixed status. Judaism existed as a foreign religion in Rome and the Greek believers joined into foreign culture, neither being fully Roman nor truly Jewish. There was an uncommon almost undefinable existence in between two incompatible systems. Greek citizens were baffled by the conversion. Jews didn't fully accommodate the Greeks, treating them as younger half-brothers at best – better treatment by Jewish followers of Christ, worse treatment by non-believing Jews.

The experience in the synagogue would have added a new burden of Law upon the Gentiles especially if they had been saved among more Gentiles. There would be some appeal to being able to live as a Jew but there would be also difficulties. Who among the Gentiles, at this point, wanted to be circumcised? Yet the Gentiles experienced the joy in Christ and the mystic of the Jewish system, which had mostly excluded Gentiles before.

The view of the Christ-focused Judaism still formed from the traditional Jewish framework. All believers learned aspects of the Law and the Prophets. Some Gentiles were better students of the Law and appreciated the discipline, others just tolerated it. Christ's teachings were learned and shared as well. Roman believers knew about the resurrection, sacrifice, grace, righteousness, end-times, love and other topics.

The experience must have turned out to be more negative than positive in the total picture, at least in the long run. And at some point the persecution by Jews against Christ followers likely occurred in Rome.

If the Rome population was 1 million, the Jewish may have been 20,000. The believers among Jews then may have only been 500 to 1000, as another guestimate, by AD49. (Just a guess of 5% Jews as being believers.) The Gentile believers could have been 100 or 200 in number.

Jews Banished

In AD 49 the Jews were banished from Rome. Judaism in Rome, essentially only of the sect following Christ, now came under the control of the Gentiles.

Natural cultural endorsement of the Claudius edict led to the conclusions that Claudius must have had a good reason for the banishment. Anti-Jewish sentiment infiltrated the Church, which still existed as a Jewish sect meeting in synagogues.

Gentiles now formed the rules and the doctrines. Change probably occurred slowly at first. If the synagogue meeting places were available, then everything started nearly intact and in similar manner. The Gentiles possibly couldn't meet, nor would want to meet, in the previous synagogue locations. Discretion would be key for the ambiguous Greek followers, who wanted to still follow the new religion but not be kicked out of town.

Paul's ministry started picking up and reaching more Gentiles. Some of these traveled to Rome in the course of business or life. Much grown came also by other Romans hearing about Christ and joining. A broader Gentile influence predominated in the Church. Greek ideas, even some of idolatry, grew. The growth of Greek members and ideas diluted the strength of the original Jewish influence.

Aspects of Judaism, as found objectionable before, now were to become abandoned or outlawed. It wasn't until about AD54 that Jews could more freely return. No outside authority or influence constrained the changes created by the Gentile believers. These Roman believers still mostly followed Christ and even some good doctrine, and they still were part of Judaism, but the style and mood changed drastically.

Jews in Banishment

The main thought here is that Jewish followers of Christ may have well joined Jewish followers of Christ in other cities. New fellowship was established. Even participation in traditional Judaism was still an acceptable option within many such synagogues. Some of the synagogues would have had Gentile followers of Christ, just as in Rome. The Roman experience simply was now enjoyed in surrounding areas. Did the Jews have to travel far or could they settle within a day's travel distance?

Jews Return

As Jews returned to Rome, no formerly established synagogues existed, neither in general nor those with followers of Jesus. Likely the traditional Judaism quickly established the synagogues or these essentially moved membership back to Rome. Even the Jewish followers of Christ could reestablish the synagogues focused on Christ, though many of the Jewish believers wanted to rejoin fellowship with the Gentile believers.

Neither group, the Jews nor the Gentiles, were quite the same. Not all the Jewish believers returned to Rome and now the Gentiles had largely different members, with many new members added after AD49.

Indeed the Jewish followers of Christ could quickly locate the gatherings of the Gentile followers, but now the mood of the Romans had changed drastically. The "church" no longer had a Jewish feel to it and the members still were resistant to and biased against Jews.

The Gentiles largely had forsaken the Law and Jewish culture. The Jews hadn't changed culturally but probably were worn out by the banishment. Animosity probably went both directions but the Greek followers had the majority control.

Main Church

The Greek believers may have had a unified congregation. They started with 100 or 200 members in AD49 but now 5 years later probably grew to be a thousand members. There would be a good potential for growth among Greeks entering a Greek-influenced religious group. Probably no revival, en masse, conversions happened. Certainly nothing of the sort was recorded.

Returning Jews may have returned in diminished numbers or approximately as many as left. (Some families didn't return. New families emigrated.) But this too was a slow process, increasing 100 or 200 Jewish believers per year. All the numbers are speculative but have sufficient ability to give insight into the relative sizes of Gentiles and Jews.

The majority shifted. Jews entered as a minority now, trickling in. Also, by this time, there may have been a greater division between traditional Jewish sects and the new sects of those following Christ. Jewish believers no longer fit into the other synagogues as well and may have been rejected from those. The pre-Christ sects began to ridicule any followers of Christ, especially bad were the zealous sects.

The Greek believers were largely unified at least to the degree they hadn't made arrangements to meet separately. Its hard to imagine how meetings were done. Maybe some were outcasts and had to meet in small house gatherings. But where and how did a thousand believers meet

and interact?

It seems like church gatherings were in smaller numbers. Maybe meetings didn't require all people to attend or there could have been many meeting times and locations. There would seem to be a manner by which fellow believers identified themselves to each other, since a thousand faces are hard to remember. Of course racial appearance may have played a role. Continuity existed and some means of identification which then also effectively provided a manner to exclude Jewish believers.

Further Developments

For the next five years after the death of Claudius, divisions grew worse. Jews of the older sects, even some of the Christ followers, were boasting about the Law. Greater divisions developed.

The Gentile believers felt like step-children and second class followers of faith. Each side were boasting against the other. Yet the Gentiles had overall control. Jewish believers were relegated to holding small house church gatherings.

The reputation got out that the Gentiles were coming to faith in good numbers, even in Rome, but that the Roman Gentile believers now were keeping the Jews out. It was Paul's intent to cause jealousy among the Jews but never to the point of excluding Jews.

There was no relief from the pressure of the Jews against the believers. Nor was there relief from the government against Jews or believers. The Roman church members even stopped paying taxes due to the words of Jesus about taxes and the troubles caused by the government. Something had to be done. Although the Roman church had not been under Paul's supervision, Paul had to address the issues in Rome or lose the effect of his overall indirect ministry to the Jews.

Version 1.0 – May 09,2009

website: <http://www.BibleReexamined.com/RomansTopics.htm>
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