

Situating Romans: Roman Jews and Roman Christians

PLACING ANY TEXT IN ITS PROPER CONTEXT IS DIFFICULT. Placing ancient texts in their proper contexts, however, is even more so. Often the evidence for establishing their contexts is little more than the texts themselves. We are reduced to hints and clues provided by the text itself or to information preserved, usually accidentally, in other texts, inscriptions, archaeological remains, and so forth. All of this must be evaluated critically. In addition, any text has its own point of view, and that point of view includes the interpretation of its own context. This too must be evaluated critically. At first this sounds like a counsel of despair. Rather, it is a cautionary tale. Establishing the contexts of an ancient text remains crucial, but one must be aware of how difficult it is and how tentative one's conclusions remain.

All this is true of Paul's letter to the Roman Christians. Because Romans is also the only extant letter of Paul written to a Christian community that he had not founded or even visited, one needs to be even more cautious about the evidence of context found in it. Nevertheless, to understand Romans, we inevitably need to understand, as best we can, the letter's multiple contexts. First, there is the context of the Roman Christians themselves. Second, because Roman Christians were originally part of the larger Roman Jewish community, we also need to understand the context of Jews in Rome during the first century A.D. Third, there is the context of Paul at this time. Paul's personal experience, his experience as a missionary, and the controversies in which he was involved all contribute to the situation in which he found himself when he wrote Romans. Finally, we need to understand the relationship between the Roman Christians and Paul, or, more precisely, between what Roman Christians knew about him or thought they knew about him and what Paul knew about the Roman Christians and their misgivings about him. This chapter looks at the contexts of the Roman Jewish and the Roman Christian communities. The following chapter examines Paul's situation and his relationship to the Roman Christian community.

In his biography of the emperor Claudius (A.D. 41–54), the Roman historian and gossip Suetonius noted briefly that “he [Claudius] expelled from Rome Jews

who were constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.”¹ The interpretation of this brief notice is the subject of much debate. There is general agreement, however, that the phrase “at the instigation of Chrestus” (*impulsore Chresto*) refers to Christ.² Since Christ was obviously never in Rome, the phrase means that during the reign of Claudius there were disturbances among Roman Jews over the significance of Christ. This led to some sort of expulsion of Jews from Rome. From the perspective of Suetonius or, more likely, his source, this was a dispute within the Roman Jewish community. This brief notice tells us that the Roman Christian community originated within the much larger Roman Jewish community. To understand the situation of the Roman Christians at the time of Romans, then, we also have to understand as clearly as possible important aspects of the Roman Jewish community during this period, that is, roughly during the first century. As we shall see, the Roman Christian community probably maintained a significant continuity of belief and practice with the Jewish way of life.³ This continuity helps us understand both their reactions to Paul and his rhetorical strategy in his letter to them.

THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF ROME

The origins of the Jewish community in Rome are obscure, but they may go back to the middle of the second century B.C.⁴ The first contact between Jews and Rome we know of is the embassy sent to Rome in 161 B.C. by Judas Maccabeus to establish an alliance between Rome and the struggling Maccabean state (1 Macc 8:17–32). The Maccabees later sent two other embassies to Rome to renew the alliance, one in 143 B.C. (1 Macc 12:1–4) and the other a year later (1 Macc 14:24; 15:15–24).⁵ First Maccabees itself gives no indication that the embassies came in contact with Jews who were already in Rome. We know, however, from Valerius Maximus, a first-century Roman writer, that Gnaeus Cornelius Hispalus, the *praetor peregrinus*, expelled Jews from Rome and “forced them to return to their homes” in 139 B.C. Because the decree came from the *praetor peregrinus* and they were forced to

¹Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4 (*GLAJJ* 2:307): *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit.*

²Suetonius seems to have confused a common Greek name for slaves and freedmen, *Chrestus* (Χρηστός), meaning “useful” or “good,” with *Christus* (Χριστός, “Christ”). By the time of Suetonius, *Chrestus* would have been pronounced the same as *Christus* through iotacism (a process in the Greek language by which several vowels and diphthongs came to be pronounced as *ē*). See Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 31.

³In general I have used the phrase “the Jewish way of life” rather than “Judaism.” The former better catches the complex and concrete combination of items that went into being a Jew or part of the Jewish community in the ancient world.

⁴In general, see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)* (rev. and ed. Geza Vermes, Fergus Millar, and Martin Goodman; 3 vols. in 4; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973–1987), vol. 3, part 1, pp. 73–81; Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (rev. ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1995), 1–45; and David Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: Citizens and Strangers* (London: Duckworth, 2000), 255–67.

⁵See Jonathan A. Goldstein, *I Maccabees* (AB 41; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 344–69, 444–62, 510–26.

return to their homes, the Jews living in Rome at this time may have been merchants and sojourners rather than either permanent residents or Roman citizens.⁶ The details are obscure, but the reason for the expulsion seems to have been the Roman authorities' perception that Jews were trying to spread their Jewish way of life to non-Jews.⁷ Although Valerius Maximus gives no further information, their number must have been large enough for the Roman authorities to take notice.

By the middle of the first century B.C., their numbers had grown significantly. This increase, although exaggerated for rhetorical purposes, is reflected in Cicero's *Pro Flacco* (28, 66), delivered in 59 B.C.⁸ In the wake of Pompey's conquest of Palestine in 63 B.C., the Jewish population of Rome was also swelled by Jewish captives from the war. According to the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria (*Legat.* 155), most of these captives were later manumitted and became Roman citizens. A good number of them settled in the Trastevere district of Rome.⁹

The relationship between the Jews of Rome and both Julius Caesar and Augustus was quite amicable. A major reason for this was the support Jews from Palestine and Egypt provided to these men at crucial points in their careers.¹⁰ In *Legat.* 156–158, Philo described in some detail Augustus's favorable treatment of Jews in Rome.¹¹ The relationship, however, between the Jews of Rome and the next two

⁶The praetors were occupied in the administration of justice. The *praetor peregrinus* dealt with lawsuits when either one or both parties were foreigners, in contrast to the *praetor urbanus*, who dealt with lawsuits between Roman citizens.

⁷Valerius Maximus, *Fact. et dict.* 1.3.3 (*GLAJJ* 1:147a–b). The text is preserved only in the epitomes of two later Latin writers (Januarius Nepotianus and Julius Paris). Both mention this kind of activity (*Romanis tradere sacra sua conati erant; Romanos inficere mores conati erant*). Valerius Maximus's source may have been the Roman historian Livy. Hispalus also expelled the Chaldean astrologers at the same time. Both expulsions reflect periodic Roman nervousness about the presence of foreign cults in Rome.

⁸"There follows the odium that is attached to Jewish gold. This is no doubt the reason why this case is being tried not far from the Aurelian Steps. You procured this place and that crowd, Laelius, for this trial. You know what a big crowd it is, how they stick together, how influential they are in public meetings. So I will speak in a low voice so that only the jurors may hear; for those are not wanting who would incite them against me and against every respectable man" (*GLAJJ* 1:68).

⁹Cicero also mentions Pompey's conquest of Palestine in *Flac.* 28, 67–68 (*GLAJJ* 1:68). It is not clear, however, whether Cicero's remarks on the Jewish crowd present at the trial also reflect the presence of these Jewish captives. Since most of the captives would not have been manumitted so quickly, it is unlikely that they would have been part of the crowd present at the trial.

¹⁰On the help provided to Julius Caesar by John Hyrcanus II and Antipater during his Egyptian campaign in 47 B.C., see Josephus, *Ant.* 14.127–139; *J.W.* 1.187–194. For the more complicated story of Herod the Great's help to Augustus, see Josephus, *Ant.* 15.183–218; *J.W.* 1.386–397, 431–434.

¹¹"He knew therefore that they have houses of prayer and meet together in them, particularly on the sacred sabbaths when they receive as a body a training in their ancestral philosophy. He knew that they collect money for sacred purposes from their firstfruits and send it to Jerusalem by persons who would offer the sacrifices. Yet nevertheless he neither ejected them from Rome nor deprived them of their Roman citizenship because they were careful to preserve their Jewish citizenship also, nor took any violent measures against the houses of prayer, nor prevented them from meeting to receive instructions in the laws, nor opposed their offerings of the firstfruits. Indeed so religiously did he respect our interests that supported by well-nigh his whole household he adorned our temple through the costliness of his dedications, and

emperors was rockier. In A.D. 19, the emperor Tiberius ordered four thousand Jews of military age deported to Sardinia to fight bandits, and the rest of the Jews and those who followed similar beliefs were banished from Rome. Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, and the Roman historian Dio Cassius all agree on the general outlines of the expulsion. Its causes, however, are less clear. Tacitus and Suetonius connect it with a wider attempt to suppress foreign cults, especially Egyptian and Jewish cults.¹² Dio Cassius connects it with Jews' success at converting non-Jews to their way of life.¹³ Josephus, however, connects the expulsion with a particular incident. A Jew who fled from Palestine to Rome to avoid punishment had, along with three confederates, swindled a wealthy Roman matron, Fulvia, who had come to practice the Jewish way of life, out of money intended by her for the Jerusalem temple.¹⁴ Josephus's explanation was probably meant to limit responsibility for the expulsion to the actions of a handful of rogue Jews. What is reflected in all four accounts, however, is Roman nervousness over, and distaste for, the influence of foreign cults on Romans.

The effects of the expulsion on Roman Jews are not clear. Certainly the deportation of four thousand men of military age to Sardinia would have been significant. Yet it is impossible to say what percentage of the other Jews actually left Rome at the time of the expulsion. One must remember that the Roman government, even in the city of Rome, was not bureaucratic in any modern sense; its means of seeing to it that decrees were carried out were limited. According to Philo (*Legat.* 159–161), for example, the effects of the expulsion were not long-lasting. After the death of Sejanus in 31, Tiberius seems to have restored the position of the Jews in Rome and elsewhere.¹⁵ Philo's admittedly brief account of the restoration does not read as if thousands of Jews now returned to Rome after being away since A.D. 19. One suspects that many Jews had never left the city in the first place.

ordered that for all time continuous sacrifices of whole burnt offerings should be carried out every day at his own expense as a tribute to the most high God [τῷ ὑψίστῳ θεῷ]. And these sacrifices are maintained to the present day and will be maintained for ever to tell the story of a character truly imperial. Yet more, in the monthly doles in his own city when all the people each in turn receive money or grain, he never put the Jews at a disadvantage in sharing the bounty, but even if the distributions happened to come during the sabbath when no one is permitted to receive anything or to transact any part of the business of ordinary life, particularly of a lucrative kind, he ordered the dispensers to reserve for the Jews till the morrow the charity which fell to all." (Colson, LCL)

¹²Tacitus, *Ann.* 2.85.4 (*GLAJJ* 2:284); Suetonius, *Tib.* 36 (*GLAJJ* 2:306).

¹³Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 57.18.5 (*GLAJJ* 2:419): Τῶν τε Ἰουδαίων πολλῶν ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην συνελθόντων καὶ συχνοῦς τῶν ἐπιχωρίων ἐς τὰ σφέτερα ἔθη μεθιστάντων, τοὺς πλείονας ἐξήλασεν ("As the Jews were flocking to Rome in great numbers and were converting many of the natives to their ways, he [Tiberius] expelled most of them.")

¹⁴Josephus, *Ant.* 18.81–84.

¹⁵Philo, writing sometime after 41 in *Legat.* 159–160, conveniently blamed the measures taken against the Jews on the influence of Sejanus, the *eminence grise* during Tiberius's reign up until his arrest and execution by the senate in 31 at Tiberius's behest. There is no evidence that Sejanus had a hand in the expulsion of A.D. 19. Sejanus is not mentioned in connection with the expulsion by any writer except Philo, but it served Philo's purposes in the *Legatio ad Gaium* well. Both of the emperors prior to Gaius Caligula, as well as Julius Caesar, could now be seen as positively disposed toward the Jews.

The reign of Gaius Caligula (37–41), although traumatic for Jews in Alexandria and Jerusalem, did not have a direct effect on the Roman Jewish community. Roman Jews must have been concerned about the anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria as well as Caligula's attempt to have a statue of himself set up in the Jerusalem temple. Their own position in Rome, however, was not affected.¹⁶

The reign of Claudius, in contrast, was more complex and troubling for the Roman Jewish community. It is also at this point that Roman Christians first emerge, as part of the Roman Jewish community in connection with the expulsion by Claudius. As mentioned above, Suetonius noted that Claudius “expelled from Rome Jews who were constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus.”¹⁷ This expulsion was probably the result of disturbances in the Roman Jewish community between the majority of Roman Jews and a minority who believed in Jesus as the Christ. Acts 18:1–2 seems to refer to the same expulsion: “After this he [Paul] left Athens and went to Corinth. There he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently [προσφάτως] come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews [πάντας Ἰουδαίους] to leave Rome.” Since Paul arrived in Corinth probably early in 51 and there met Aquila and Priscilla/Prisca, who had recently (προσφάτως) arrived from Rome, the expulsion seems to have occurred in the late 40s. This is confirmed by an admittedly confused reference in the early-fifth-century Christian historian Orosius, who placed the expulsion in the ninth year of Claudius's reign, that is, in 49.¹⁸ Once again, as with the expulsion in 19 under Tiberius, it is unclear who were actually expelled or who actually left Rome. Whereas Acts 18:2 refers to “all Jews” (πάντας Ἰουδαίους) being expelled, Suetonius's reference is ambiguous. The phrase “Jews who were constantly making disturbances” could refer to the expulsion of Jews in general or only to the expulsion of those who had been involved in the disturbances.¹⁹ Given the limited ability of the Roman government to enforce its decrees, one suspects that the author of Acts 18:2 has exaggerated the extent of the expulsion. This is confirmed by the early-third-century Roman historian Dio Cassius, referring to events that he connected with Claudius's accession in 41: “As for the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that by reason of their multitude it would have been hard without raising a tumult to bar them from the city, he [Claudius] did not drive them out, but ordered

¹⁶For accounts of these events, see Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium*, and Josephus, *Ant.* 18.257–309; *J.W.* 2.184–203.

¹⁷Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4 (*GLAJJ* 2:307).

¹⁸Orosius, *Adv. pag.* 7.6.15: *Anno eiusdem nono expulsos per Claudium urbe Iudaeos Iosephus refert. Sed me magis Suetonius movet, quo ait hoc modo* [the quotation from Suetonius follows]. The problem is that no such quotation is found in Josephus. We have no idea where Orosius obtained his information, which he wrongly attributed to Josephus. But there is no reason to think he obtained it from Acts 18:1–2. Only in this way does Orosius's remark tend to confirm the dating of the expulsion to the late 40s.

¹⁹In the phrase *Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis*, the participial phrase *assidue tumultuantis* could be taken either as expressing the cause of the expulsion or as specifying the meaning of the noun *Iudaeos*. In the former case, it would refer to all Roman Jews; in the latter, only to those who were involved in the disturbances. The second interpretation is more likely.

them, while continuing their traditional way of life, not to hold meetings.”²⁰ Since there is no reason to think the situation in 41 described by Dio Cassius was any different at the end of the decade, the expulsion mentioned by Suetonius, Acts 18:2, and Orosius was probably limited to those involved in the disturbances. The situation of the Roman Jewish community under Claudius, then, was a troubled one. Soon after his accession, he ordered the Jews of Rome not to hold meetings. Then, toward the end of the decade, he expelled from Rome those who had been involved in disturbances within the Jewish community over belief in Jesus as the Christ.

As one looks over what we know of the history of the Jewish community of Rome through the middle of the first century, one is first struck by the extent to which its situation was affected by the decisions of the Roman government, whether under the republic or under the empire. Its status depended on the goodwill or ill will of the Roman authorities. This is hardly surprising, but it is important to keep in mind.

Three other aspects of the Roman Jewish community of the first century are also important, especially for understanding the Christian community in Rome. First, the Roman Jewish community was probably organized as independent voluntary associations. Although in some ways the status of the Jewish community of Rome was of a piece with that of other Hellenistic Jewish communities, there were also significant differences. In much of the Greek-speaking East, the status of Hellenistic Jewish communities had previously depended on the attitudes of their Hellenistic overlords. When the Romans achieved dominance in the East, they usually reaffirmed for the Hellenistic Jewish communities the status and privileges granted by the previous rulers. In most cases this meant that Jews lived in Hellenistic cities as groups of aliens (*μέτοικοι*, *peregrini*). The public recognition of these communities usually included the rights to live according to their ancestral customs, to regulate their own finances, and to have jurisdiction over their own members. This also meant some sort of centralized organization of the Jewish community in each city. These privileges, which gave Jewish communities in the East a quasi-civic status, were reaffirmed by the Roman authorities, often in the face of attempts by Greek cities to abolish them.²¹

²⁰Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 60.6.6 (*GLAJJ* 2:422): Τούς τε Ἰουδαίους πλεονάσαντας αὐθις, ὥστε χαλεπῶς ἂν ἀνευ ταραχῆς ὑπὸ τοῦ ὄχλου σφῶν τῆς πόλεως εἰρχθῆναι, οὐκ ἐξήλασε μὲν, τῷ δὲ δὴ πατρίῳ βίῳ χρωμένους ἐκέλευσε μὴ συναθροίζεσθαι. Some scholars have suggested that this notice in Dio Cassius referred to the same events mentioned in Suetonius and Act 18:1–2, and then date all the events to either 41 or 49. The problem with this interpretation is that Suetonius and Acts clearly mention an expulsion but Dio Cassius explicitly denies there was an expulsion. In addition, Dio Cassius clearly dates Claudius’s suppression of Jewish public meetings to 41, the first year of his reign; Acts 18:2 and Orosius date the expulsion to the end of the decade, that is, to around 49. From what follows immediately in Dio Cassius (τάς τε ἑταιρείας ἐπαναχθείσας ὑπὸ τοῦ Γαίου διέλυσε), Claudius’s suppression of Jewish meetings in 41 was part of a larger effort to suppress voluntary associations (*ἑταιρεῖαι*, *collegia*) in general. Claudius’s actions in 49 were intended to rid Rome of what he thought were troublemakers in the Jewish community and not to expel all Jews from Rome.

²¹For examples of Roman decrees affirming Jewish privileges in Greek cities, see Josephus, *Ant.* 14.185–267; 16.160–178. See Schürer, *History*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 107–25, for descriptions of the legal situations of different Jewish communities; also A. M. Rabello, “The Legal Condition of the Jews in the Roman Empire,” *ANRW* 13.662–762.

The status of the Roman Jews, however, was different. It was not that of a group of aliens with quasi-civic standing but of a voluntary association or, more likely, associations. Voluntary associations were an integral part of both Greek and Roman culture. They were more or less permanently organized associations for a common purpose. Most had a religious component, but the specific purposes of the associations varied. Some were primarily religious, others were burial societies, and still others were composed of fellow workers in the same craft, industry, or trade.²² Evidence indicates that the Jews of Rome were organized as voluntary associations. Josephus (*Ant.* 14.215–216) records a decree of Julius Caesar in which he banned religious associations (θιάσους) in Rome but excepted the Jews.²³ Similarly Dio Cassius connects the emperor Claudius's suppression of Jewish meetings in 41 with a larger effort to suppress voluntary associations (ἑταιρείαι) in general.²⁴

There were a number of these Jewish associations in Rome, and they seem to have been independently organized local congregations or "synagogues," as the inscriptions refer to them.²⁵ Because almost all of the Roman Jewish inscriptions, which mention roughly thirteen of them, come from the third and fourth centuries, it is difficult to determine how many existed in the first century.²⁶ Peter Richardson has offered convincing evidence that at least three and perhaps as many as five go back to the reign of Augustus in the late first century B.C. and in the early first century A.D.²⁷ Given that the size of the Jewish community in Rome during the

²²For associations in the ancient world, see the classic studies of Erich Ziebarth, *Das griechische Vereinswesen* (Stuttgart: S. Hirzel, 1896); Franz Poland, *Geschichte der griechischen Vereinswesens* (1909; repr., Leipzig: Zentral-Antiquariat der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1967); Jean Pierre Waltzing, *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains depuis les origines jusqu'à la chute de l'Empire d'Occident* (4 vols.; 1895–1900; repr., Bologna: Forni, 1968). Most recently see John S. Kloppenborg and S. G. Wilson, eds., *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1996).

²³On Julius Caesar's legislation to abolish various voluntary associations, see Suetonius, *Jul.* 42.3 where these associations are referred to with their Latin name *collegia*.

²⁴Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 60.6.6.

²⁵Leon, *Jews*, 167–70. The term "synagogue" probably referred to the congregation. The building in which the congregation met was a "house of prayer [προσευχή]" (Philo, *Legat.* 156; *JlWE* 2:602 [*CIJ* 531]; Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.296). From *JlWE* 2:602 and Juvenal, it is clear that at least some of these houses of prayer were buildings publicly recognized as centers for Jewish congregations. On the complex question of the character of such buildings, see L. Michael White, "Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 30–68.

²⁶For the collection of these inscriptions and their dating, see the new critical edition of all the inscriptions in *JlWE*, vol. 2.

²⁷Peter Richardson, "Augustan-Era Synagogues in Rome," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 17–29. These synagogues are: (1) "Synagogue of the Hebrews" (*JlWE* 2:2 [*CIJ* 317], 2:33 [291], 2:578 [510], 2:579 [535]); (2) "Synagogue of the Augustesians" (2:96 [301], 2:169 [?] [338], 2:189 [368], 2:194 [416], 2:542 [496], 2:547 [284]); (3) "Synagogue of the Agrippans" (2:130[?] [425], 2:170 [365], 2:549 [503], 2:562); (4) "Synagogue of the Volumnians" (2:100 [402], 2:163 [417], 2:167 [343], 2:577 [523]); and (5) "Synagogue of the Herodians" (2:292 [173]). The evidence for the last two is considerably weaker than that for the first three.

first century A.D. has been estimated at between twenty thousand and forty or even fifty thousand, other synagogues probably also existed at that time, perhaps some of those attested in other Roman Jewish inscriptions.²⁸ An analysis of the synagogal offices mentioned in the inscriptions shows no evidence of a centralized organization beyond the level of the individual congregation.²⁹ Again, although these inscriptions are almost all from the third and fourth centuries, there is no reason to think that the situation was different in the first century. This is especially true given the Roman government's constant suspicion of voluntary associations. It is difficult to imagine that the Roman authorities would have countenanced a centralized organization of up to forty or fifty thousand members. This does not, of course, exclude more informal relationships among these communities. It would be naive to think that Jewish communities in Rome, given their common origins and interests, had no such informal relationships among themselves. They almost certainly did.

The second important aspect of the Roman Jewish community was its connection with the Jews of Palestine. The origins of most members of the Roman Jewish community had been in Palestine. According to Philo (*Legat.* 155), most Roman Jews were by his time Roman citizens, but they had originally been brought to Rome as slaves in the wake of Pompey's conquest of Palestine in 63 B.C. and had subsequently been emancipated. In addition, in the first century A.D., Herodian princes from Palestine were raised in Rome and became personal friends of future emperors. Between A.D. 37 and 44 Agrippa I became king of an area in Palestine that rivaled in size that of his grandfather Herod the Great, largely through his friendship with Gaius Caligula and Claudius.³⁰ The Roman Jewish community itself also took an active interest in the political affairs in Palestine. For example, after the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., it publicly sided with a Jewish embassy from Palestine against Archelaus and his efforts to obtain rule over all his father Herod's domains.³¹ Because of the political centrality of Rome, contacts between the Roman Jewish community and Palestinian Jews were especially frequent and significant.

The third important aspect of the Roman Jewish community was the presence of Gentiles sympathetic to the Jewish way of life. The existence of such sympathetic Gentiles and their relationship to the Roman Jewish community is part of the larger and quite controversial issue of whether Judaism during this period was a "missionary" religion; that is, whether Jews during this period intentionally sought, as a group, to make converts to their way of life.³² Stated in such broad terms, the issue

²⁸The lower figure was suggested by R. Penna, "Les Juifs à Rome au temps de l'apôtre Paul," *NTS* 28 (1982): 328. The higher number was accepted by Leon, *Jews*, 135–36.

²⁹Leon, *Jews*, 167–94. A recently discovered epitaph listing a Jew by the name of Anastasius as ἀρχιγερονσιάρχης (*JJWE* 2:521) probably refers to the leader of the gerousia of an individual synagogue.

³⁰Raymond E. Brown, in Raymond E. Brown and John P. Meier, *Antioch and Rome: New Testament Cradles of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist, 1983), 95–96. See also Schürer, *History*, 1:442–54.

³¹Josephus, *J. W.* 2.80–83; *Ant.* 17.299–303.

³²Both Schürer (*History*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 150–76) and Louis H. Feldman (*Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* [Princeton,

lies beyond the scope of this analysis, which is confined to what we can know or plausibly surmise about the presence of sympathetic Gentiles connected specifically with the Roman Jewish community.

Various Roman writers were clearly alarmed at the influence of the Jewish way of life on the non-Jewish inhabitants of Rome. This is especially the case for writers of late republican and early imperial Rome, such as Horace, Valerius Maximus, Seneca the Younger, Tacitus, and Juvenal.³³ For example, Seneca complained that “the way of life of this accursed race [the Jews] has gained such influence that it is now received throughout the world; the vanquished have given laws to their victors.”³⁴ In the same vein, Tacitus lamented that “those who have gone over to their [the Jews] way of life follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account.”³⁵ In addition, two of the expulsions of Jews from Rome mentioned above (in 139 B.C. and A.D. 19) were connected with the Roman authorities’ alarm at a growing Jewish influence on the other inhabitants of Rome.³⁶ Both, it should be noted, were part of wider expulsions of devotees of foreign cults, of Chaldean astrology in 139 B.C. and of Egyptian cults in A.D. 19. This indicates that, at least to some extent, the stance of the Roman authorities toward the Jewish way of life was of a piece with their stance toward other foreign cults in Rome.

Does all this evidence lead to the conclusion that the Roman Jewish community had an intentional policy of proselytism during this period, especially during the late republican and early imperial periods? Probably not. The evidence of the expulsions attests to the attractiveness of Eastern religious traditions to some inhabitants in Rome but not necessarily to a sustained missionary effort on their part. The evidence of the Roman writers mentioned above also needs to be treated critically. All of them viewed with alarm the influence of the Jewish way of life (and of Eastern religions generally) on the inhabitants of Rome. All of them tended to reflect the disdain of the Roman upper classes for all things foreign, even though some of them were themselves parvenus. In their alarm they probably exaggerated the extent of the influence of these religions, particularly the Jewish way of life, on the Roman

N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993], 288–415) think there was such an effort. Scot McKnight (*A Light among the Gentiles: Jewish Missionary Activity in the Second Temple Period* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991]) and Martin Goodman (*Mission and Conversion: Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994]) think there was not. For an earlier defense of Jewish missionary activity and its place within the larger Greco-Roman context of religious competition, see Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 83–228.

³³Horace, *Serm.* 1.4.139–43 (*GLAJJ* 1:127); 1.9.60–78 (*GLAJJ* 1:129); Valerius Maximus, *Fact. et dict.* 1.3.3 (*GLAJJ* 1:147a–b); Seneca, *De superstitione*, in Augustine, *Civ.* 6.11 (*GLAJJ* 1:186); Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (*GLAJJ* 2:281); Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.96–106 (*GLAJJ* 2:301).

³⁴Seneca, *De superstitione*, in Augustine, *Civ.* 6.11 (*GLAJJ* 1:186): *Cum interim usque eo sceleratissimae gentis consuetudo convaluit, ut per omnes iam terras recepta sit; victi victoribus leges dederunt.* Translation by Green, LCL.

³⁵Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (*GLAJJ* 2:281): *Transgressi in morem eorum idem usurpant, nec quidquam prius imbuuntur quam contemnere deos, exuere patriam, parentes liberos fratres vilia habere.* Translation by Moore, LCL.

³⁶See pp. 17–19.

populace. Again, because of their disdain, they saw this influence as the result of an intentional program of deception by the members of these religions. After all, what else could explain their attractiveness?

This being said, however, the fact remains that the Jewish way of life must have been attractive to a large enough body of inhabitants of Rome to be noticed both by the Roman authorities and these Roman writers. This seems especially to have been the case for the late republic and the early empire. We have no idea of how large this group was, and we may reasonably suspect that these writers exaggerated its size. Nevertheless, all the evidence points to the attractiveness of the Jewish way of life to some Romans.

We need to explore two issues further. First, can we tell what it was about the Jewish way of life that some non-Jews in Rome found attractive? Second, what were the responses among those who were sympathetic to the Jewish way of life? Were some more closely connected to the Jewish community than others? In answer to the first question, there were several aspects of the Jewish way of life that some non-Jews found attractive and that Roman writers mention, although they often interpret them negatively. Our discussion is based on what we can know or plausibly surmise specifically about the situation in Rome.

The first aspect is Jewish monotheism, which both Tacitus and Juvenal mention. They view Jewish rejection of the Roman gods negatively.³⁷ Still, in comparing Jewish monotheism with the Egyptian worship of animals, Tacitus writes favorably about the Jewish conception of God as supreme, eternal, and incapable of being represented in human form.³⁸ Monotheism, at least in the sense of belief in one god as supreme and the other gods as subordinate to, or as expressions of, this one god, had long been part of the Greco-Roman world, especially in Greek and Roman philosophy. During the imperial period it became more popular and widespread.³⁹ Interest in Jewish monotheism was part of a wider monotheistic trend during this period. From the *Letter of Aristeas* in the second century B.C. on, Hellenistic Jewish literature capitalized on this and made claims for the superiority of the Jewish way of life on the basis of its stark monotheism.

The second is the antiquity of the Jewish people, an antiquity widely conceded by Greek and Latin authors. Tacitus offers several possible explanations for the origins of the Jewish people and assumes that their origins were quite ancient, one tracing them back to the time of the expulsion of Saturn by Jove, another tracing them back to the reign of Isis in Egypt (*Hist.* 5.2.1–3). The same admission of antiquity is true for his explanation of the expulsion of the Jews from Egypt at the time of King Bocchoris and the establishment of the Jewish law by Moses (*Hist.* 5.3–4).

³⁷Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (*GLAJJ* 2:281) (see above); Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.97 (*GLAJJ* 2:301): “They worship nothing but the clouds and the divinity of the heavens.” (Ramsay, LCL)

³⁸Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.4 (*GLAJJ* 2:281).

³⁹See *OCD*, s.v. monotheism; Martin P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (2 vols.; 3d ed.; Munich: Beck, 1967–1974), 2.569–78; Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome* (2 vols.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1.286–87. All point out that “henotheism” (the worship of one god in particular or a special devotion to one god) may be a better term than “monotheism.” The belief in the supremacy of one god over the other gods falls somewhere between the two.

The third is observance of the Sabbath rest, which Horace, Seneca, and Juvenal all mention.⁴⁰ Evidence indicates that by the first century the seven-day week as well as observance of the seventh day as a day of rest were becoming more widespread among non-Jews. The latter, however, was probably due less to the influence of the Jewish way of life than to the belief that Saturday, the “day of Saturn,” was an unlucky day on which to do business.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the coincidence of the two must have made the Jewish way of life attractive to at least some non-Jews.

Although it may at first seem odd, a fourth aspect was its prohibitions in matters of food. Both Tacitus and Juvenal mention this, again with disapproval.⁴² The attraction of these prohibitions was connected with the ascetic aspects of Greco-Roman culture, especially Greco-Roman philosophy.⁴³ Seneca provides an indirect witness to this in *Ep.* 108.22. He describes how as a young man he had abstained from animal food under Pythagorean influence. But he stopped the practice at his father's request early in the reign of Tiberius because foreign cults were expelled from Rome at this time and abstinence from certain kinds of animal food was considered a sign of interest in them. This is almost certainly a reference to Tiberius's expulsion of Jews (and devotees of Egyptian cults) from Rome in 19. Indirectly, then, he attests to the attraction of Jewish abstinence from certain foods for some non-Jews in Rome.

A fifth aspect was its strong sense of community. On the one hand, many Romans found this inner Jewish cohesion offensive because it showed a hatred for the rest of the human race. Both Tacitus and Juvenal reflect this perception.⁴⁴ Tacitus in particular thought that Jews felt only hostility and hatred toward every other people and that those who went over to the Jewish way of life came to despise their own country and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account, as mentioned earlier. On the other hand, even someone as hostile as Tacitus

⁴⁰Horace, *Serm.* 1.9.68–72 (*GLAJJ* 1:129): “Today is the thirtieth day, a Sabbath. Would you affront the circumcised Jews? ‘I have no scruples,’ say I. ‘But I have. I am a somewhat weaker brother, one of the many’” (Fairclough, LCL); Seneca, *De superstitione*, in Augustine, *Civ.* 6.11 (*GLAJJ* 1:186), after condemning observance of the Sabbath, writes, “The customs of this accursed race have gained such influence that they are now received throughout the world” (Green, LCL); Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.96, 105–106 (*GLAJJ* 2:301): “Some have a father who reveres the Sabbath. . . . For all this the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life.” (Ramsay, LCL)

⁴¹Tibullus, *Carm.* 1.3.18; Elias J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (2d ed.; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 58–61; Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion*, 2.487.

⁴²Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (*GLAJJ* 2:281): “They sit apart at meals”; Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.98–99 (*GLAJJ* 2:301): “They see no difference between eating swine's flesh, from which their father abstained, and human flesh.” (Ramsay, LCL)

⁴³Platonists, Stoics, Cynics, and Pythagoreans all had elements of asceticism connected with them. See *OCD*, s.v. asceticism; Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). Notions of asceticism are also found in ancient medical literature. See Gail Paterson Corrington, “The Defense of the Body and the Discourse of Appetite: Continence and Control in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Discursive Formations, Ascetic Piety, and the Interpretation of Early Christian Literature* (ed. Vincent L. Wimbush; 2 vols.; *Semeia* 57–58. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 1:65–74.

⁴⁴Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1–2 (*GLAJJ* 2:281); Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.103–4 (*GLAJJ* 2:301).

commends Jews' loyalty to one another, their readiness to show each other compassion, and their care for the burial of their dead.⁴⁵ It is this community aspect that some non-Jews in Rome must have also found attractive. This was especially the case given how difficult life must have been for the vast majority of inhabitants of an ancient city such as Rome. This interest in a stronger sense of community was also part of a broader trend that made for the growing attractiveness of alternative cults.⁴⁶ The attractiveness of this aspect of the Jewish way of life should not be underestimated.

A sixth and crucial aspect of the Jewish way of life that some non-Jews in Rome found attractive was the Jewish claim for the ethical superiority of the Mosaic law. Once again Tacitus writes with grudging admiration about certain aspects of Jewish ethics, such as Jews' loyalty and compassion toward one another, their condemnation of infanticide, their care for burying their dead, and the willingness of the whole population of Jerusalem, both men and women, to fight on its behalf.⁴⁷ Certainly, Greco-Roman Jewish authors constantly claimed ethical superiority for the Jews. An emphasis on this superiority, as we shall see a bit later, was also an important element in the self-understanding of the Roman Christian community.

The Jewish historian Josephus, writing at the end of the first century, listed these same aspects and claimed that non-Jews found them attractive and widely imitated them (*Ag. Ap.* 2.281–284).⁴⁸ In fact, he emphasizes these aspects of the Jewish way of life throughout his own account, in *Ag. Ap.* 2.145–286, of the Jewish constitution (2.145–219) and his comparison of it with other constitutions (2.220–278): (1) monotheism (2.164–167; 190–192); (2) antiquity (2.154–156, 168, 256–257); (3) observance of the Sabbath rest (2.174, 234); (4) abstention from certain foods (2.174, 234); (5) density of community (2.146, 179–183, 257); (6) ethical superiority (2.146, 170–171, 199–211, 214). No doubt Josephus exaggerated the number of Gentiles for whom these aspects of the Jewish way of life were attractive. Nevertheless, both Josephus and various Roman writers did take note of these six characteristics. Often the Roman writers did so reluctantly, but this very reluctance points to the reality that they were attractive to some Gentile inhabitants of Rome. There is a significant overlap between what Josephus explains is central to the Jewish way of life and what was also attractive about the Jewish way of life to non-Jews.

⁴⁵Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1–3 (*GLAJJ* 2:281).

⁴⁶Beard, *Religions of Rome*, 1:287–91.

⁴⁷Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1, 4; 5.13.3 (*GLAJJ* 2:281).

⁴⁸“Our earliest imitators were the Greek philosophers, who, though ostensibly observing the laws of their own countries, yet in their conduct and philosophy were Moses' disciples, holding similar views about God, and advocating the simple life and friendly communion between man and man. But that is not all. The masses have long since shown a keen desire to adopt our religious observances; and there is not one city, Greek or barbarian, nor a single nation, to which our custom of abstaining from work on the seventh day has not spread and where the fast and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed. Moreover, they attempt to imitate our unanimity, our liberal charities, our devoted labor in the crafts, our endurance under persecution on behalf of our laws. The greatest miracle of all is that our Law holds out no seductive bait of sensual pleasure, but has exercised this influence through its own inherent merits; and, as God permeates the universe, so the Law has found its way among all mankind.” (Thackeray, LCL)

Josephus, however, also offers us something more, a glimpse into the self-understanding of the Roman Jewish community itself. Parts of Josephus's *Against Apion* (2.145–286) plausibly provide us with a more specific sense of how Roman Jews understood the superiority of the Jewish way of life and indirectly how that superiority would have been attractive to some non-Jewish inhabitants of Rome. In 71, after the end of the Jewish War, Josephus came to Rome with Titus, the Roman commander. He arrived in Rome about fifteen years after Paul wrote his letter to the Roman Christian community, and he lived in Rome from 71 until his death in about 100. At least through the reigns of Vespasian (69–79) and his son Titus (79–81), Josephus lived in quarters provided him by the emperors. His relationship with Titus's successor Domitian (81–96) is less clear. His patron during these later years seems to have been a man by the name of Marcus Vettius Epaphroditus rather than Domitian.⁴⁹ When Josephus arrived in Rome, he had some knowledge of Greek, but his real Greek “education” took place in Rome. He obtained most of his knowledge of Greek literature at Rome rather than earlier in Palestine.⁵⁰

Josephus says virtually nothing about what his relationship to the Jewish community in Rome might have been.⁵¹ No doubt that relationship was complex, but it is difficult to imagine that there was no relationship. The Jewish community in Rome could hardly have ignored a Jew so closely connected with the emperors. The most likely source for much of the extrabiblical Jewish material Josephus used in his writings would have been the Jewish community in Rome. For example, most of the arguments Josephus used in *Ag. Ap.* 2.145–286 to show the superiority of the Mosaic law have parallels in other Greco-Roman Jewish literature. It is highly unlikely that he gained this familiarity while in Palestine and much more likely that he gained it through contact with the Jewish community after his arrival in Rome. The educated stratum of the Roman Jewish community would have been the obvious source for such material.

The commonplace character of many of his arguments, however, should not lead us to think that there were no differences of outlook among different Jewish communities. Just as Philo was part of a larger intellectual tradition characteristic of the Judaism of Alexandria, Josephus's account of the Mosaic law—the Jewish constitution—and its superiority probably reflected outlooks and emphases at home in the Jewish community of Rome in the first century, or at least among its more educated members. To think otherwise would turn Josephus into a first-century Melchizedek.

⁴⁹Harold W. Attridge, “Josephus and His Works,” in *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran, Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (ed. Michael E. Stern; CRINT 2.2; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 186–87.

⁵⁰Even though written in Rome, the first edition of his *Jewish War* was written in Aramaic (Josephus, *J.W.* 1.3).

⁵¹We know very little else about his life in Rome. The short section of Josephus's *Life* (422–430) given to his time in Rome is devoted almost completely to showing how high his standing was with the Flavian emperors even in the face of numerous accusations against him. At least some of his accusers were Jewish (*Life* 424–425, 428–29), but it is not clear that all these Jewish accusers were Roman Jews. The only Jewish accuser he names (a certain Jonathan) was from Cyrene.

A striking characteristic of *Ag. Ap.* 2.145–286 is the extent and specificity of the comparisons—all intended to show the superiority of the Jewish constitution—that he makes between the Mosaic law and other, primarily Greek, constitutions.⁵² It was certainly commonplace in Greco-Roman Jewish literature to speak of the Jewish way of life and the Mosaic law as superior to the laws and practices of non-Jews. But the comparisons were usually of a general sort. For example, Philo of Alexandria, in the beginning of *De opificio mundi* (1–3), asserts the superiority of the Mosaic law over the work of other lawgivers, but he does so in a very general way, without ever mentioning the names of those lawgivers. Josephus, however, is very explicit about who these other lawgivers are and about why the Mosaic law is superior to them. He devotes a whole section in his account of the Mosaic law to a comparison with the laws and practices of other peoples (*Ag. Ap.* 2.220–278). He shows the superiority of the Jewish constitution over those of the Spartans, the Athenians, the Scythians, and the Persians.

But these specific comparisons are not limited to this one section. They are quite extensive. At the beginning of his exposition (*Ag. Ap.* 2.150), he justifies these comparisons by claiming that he is only responding to anti-Jewish critics who have denied that Jews possessed these laws or that they were the most law-abiding of all the nations.⁵³ In 2.151–168, Josephus claims that the Jewish constitution is older than the laws of Lycurgus, Solon, Zaleucus, Minos, Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Plato, and the Stoics. The superiority of the Mosaic law is also demonstrated by its combination of precept and practice (2.169–174). This is unlike the laws of the Spartans and the Cretans, who emphasize practice only, and unlike the laws of the Athenians and most others, who emphasize precepts only. Josephus also repeatedly emphasizes that, unlike other peoples, all the Jews observe their laws and educate their children in the knowledge and practice of them.⁵⁴ Likewise he emphasizes in various ways the ethical superiority of the Mosaic law over other laws.⁵⁵ The Mosaic law was established to promote the virtues of piety, friendly relations with each other, love of humanity, justice, perseverance, and contempt of death (2.145). Josephus especially emphasizes the superiority of Jewish sexual morality. Sexual relations are confined to marriage for the purpose of the procreation of children (2.199). Adultery, rape, homosexual practices, abortion, and incest are condemned.⁵⁶ This code of sexual morality is contrasted to the licentious Greek conception of the gods and the lax sexual morality that went with it.⁵⁷

There is good reason to think that Josephus's extensive and specific comparisons of the Mosaic law with other codes of law did not originate with Josephus

⁵²Josephus leaves Roman beliefs and practices and Roman traditions of law untouched. In one sense, the reason is clear: he did not want to anger his Roman benefactors. There may also, however, be another reason: the apologetic side of Jewish literature in Greek was aimed at Greeks and other people of the eastern Mediterranean rather than at the Romans. This may be another indication of how traditional the arguments made by Josephus were.

⁵³Josephus repeats this justification in *Ag. Ap.* 2.236–238.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 2.175–178, 189, 204, 220–224, 225–231, 271–278.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 2.145, 199–214, 225–235, 250–254, 273.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 2.199–203, 215, 273–275, 276.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 2.243–247, 273–275.

himself but were already part of the traditions of the Roman Jewish community with which he came in contact. This emerges from an analysis of *Ag. Ap.* 2.145–278, where Josephus alters his way of arguing. In the earlier sections, he responded to specific charges made by different Greek writers, but in 2.145–278, he gives an overall exposition of the law and compares it with other law codes. He justifies this change by claiming that Apollonius Molon, unlike the writers treated up to then, did not group his accusations together but scattered them throughout his work. Because of this, Josephus thought it more appropriate to present a general exposition of the law and its superiority that would refute the various charges made by Apollonius. There is no reason, however, to think that Apollonius's charges were any more scattered than the writers Josephus explicitly refuted earlier. The justification is quite artificial. It really serves as a hook on which Josephus can now hang an overall exposition and justification of the Mosaic law. This exposition is only tangentially connected with Apollonius; Josephus mentions him only incidentally toward the end of the exposition (2.236, 254, 258, 270). The exposition is largely independent of any specific charges Apollonius may have made and was not composed for the specific purpose of refuting him. The overall structure of 2.145–278 was certainly Josephus's own, yet he returns to the same topics several times in the course of his exposition and comparison. This suggests that he probably used several already existing defenses of the Mosaic law that were available to him through the Roman Jewish community. He extensively edited them, but he did not create them out of whole cloth.

This means that the Roman Jewish community itself already had a self-understanding that strongly emphasized the superiority of the Mosaic law over other codes of law and the superiority of Jews' observance of their law over other peoples' nonobservance of their own laws. This superiority included the topics mentioned earlier: Jewish monotheism and antiquity, observance of the Sabbath rest, abstinence from certain foods, density of community, and ethical superiority, especially in sexual matters. Roman Jews would have communicated this same sense of superiority to sympathetic Gentile inhabitants of Rome. Indeed, this claim to superiority was probably what some Gentile inhabitants of Rome found attractive, even though it clearly infuriated others.

After this somewhat detailed description of what some non-Jews found attractive in the Jewish way of life, one further issue needs attention. Among those who were sympathetic to the Jewish way of life, were there different levels of commitment to it? Were there different levels of association involvement with the Jewish community?⁵⁸ Were some more closely connected through their beliefs and practices to the Jewish community than others? From what we can know or plausibly surmise

⁵⁸ See Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999), 140–74. Cohen lists seven ways in which a Gentile could show respect or affection for Judaism: (1) admiring some aspect of Judaism, (2) acknowledging the power of the God of the Jews, (3) benefiting the Jews or being conspicuously friendly to Jews, (4) practicing some or many of the rituals of the Jews, (5) venerating the God of the Jews and denying or ignoring all other gods, (6) joining the Jewish community with “conversion,” e.g., in the case of Gentile wives and slaves, (7) converting to Judaism and “becoming a Jew.”

about the Roman Jewish community, the evidence, although not plentiful, points to different levels of commitment and association. Some inhabitants of Rome who found the Jewish way of life attractive converted fully to it. Technically they became “proselytes” and were no longer “Gentiles.”⁵⁹ For males, this would have involved circumcision. Both Juvenal and Tacitus took notice of this group of people.⁶⁰

Among others, however, who adopted the various Jewish beliefs and practices mentioned above and associated regularly with the Roman Jewish community, the practice of the Jewish way of life was more limited in the sense that it did not entail circumcision and full “conversion.” We have the names of several of them.⁶¹ Suetonius was probably referring to such sympathizers when he related how the emperor Tiberius banished from Rome both Jews and “those who followed similar beliefs [*similia sectantes*]” in 19.⁶² The most enlightening evidence, however, comes from Juvenal:

Some, whose lot it was to have a Sabbath-fearing father,
worship nothing but the clouds and the divinity of the heavens,
and see no difference between human flesh and swine’s flesh,
from which their father abstained; then they take to circumcision.
Having become accustomed to despise the laws of Rome,
they learn and practice and reverence the Jewish law,
all that Moses handed down in his secret tome. (*Sat.* 14.96–102 [Thackeray, LCL])⁶³

Juvenal describes those whose fathers came to believe in the one God of the Jews, observed the Sabbath rest, and kept some of the dietary laws of the Jewish way of life. Their sons then took the final step and were circumcised. Although Juvenal takes a dim view of all this, his description of levels of belief and practice was probably accurate. Some Gentiles sympathetic to the Jewish way of life did not have themselves

⁵⁹See Schürer, *History*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 150–76. Five or six of the names found in the Jewish inscriptions of Rome are described as proselytes (*JJWE* 2:62 [*CIJ* 462], 2:218 [256], 2:224 [222], 2:392 [?] [202], 2:489 [21], 2:491 [68]). These inscriptions, however, probably all come from the third and fourth centuries.

⁶⁰Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (*GLAJJ* 2:281); Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.99 (*GLAJJ* 2:301).

⁶¹Quintus Caecilius Niger, a first-century B.C. Roman freedman who became quaestor (Plutarch, *Cic.* 7.6.5 [*GLAJJ* 1:263]); Flavius Clemens and his wife, Flavia Domatilla (late first century) (Dio Cassius, *Hist. rom.* 67.14.1–2 [*GLAJJ* 2:435]). Fulvia, the Roman aristocrat mentioned by Josephus in *Ant.* 18.81–85 in connection with the expulsion of the Jews from Rome in *Ant.* 19, may be another example. It is not clear, however, whether Josephus, in describing her as “practicing Jewish customs” (νομίμοις προσεληλυθυῖαν τοῖς Ἰουδαικοῖς), thought of her as an actual convert to Judaism (a proselyte) or as a sympathizer. Given her position in Roman society, one suspects the latter is more likely, no matter what Josephus actually thought. Another such sympathizer may have been Nero’s wife, Poppaea (Josephus, *Ant.* 20.195). This, however, is less clear.

⁶²Suetonius, *Tib.* 36 (*GLAJJ* 2:306).

⁶³*Quidam sortiti metuentem sabbata patrem
nil praeter nubes et caeli numen adorant,
nec distare putant humana carne suillam,
qua pater abstinuit, mox et praepudia ponunt.
Romanas autem soliti contemnere leges
Iudaicum ediscunt et servant ac metuunt ius,
tradidit arcano quodcumque volumine Moyses.*

circumcised. In this way, they remained as Gentile sympathizers and associated with the Jewish community but were neither fully converted to the Jewish way of life nor fully part of the Jewish community. According to Juvenal, these Gentile sympathizers might associate with the Jewish community through the study of the Mosaic law. The most obvious way to do this was to attend synagogue services.⁶⁴

Another helpful text comes again from Josephus, and it mirrors Juvenal's description in significant ways. In *Ag. Ap.* 2.209–210, Josephus describes Moses' legislation about the proper treatment of aliens (ἄλλοφύλους):

It is also worthwhile considering how our legislator was concerned about the equitable treatment of aliens. For it will be clear that he took the best of all possible measures both so that we would not corrupt our customs and also so that we would not begrudge those who choose to share them. To all who desire to come and live under the same laws with us, he gives a gracious welcome, holding that this relationship is constituted not by birth alone but also by the choice of a way of life. On the other hand, he did not want casual visitors to be admitted to the intimacies of our daily life. (Thackeray, LCL)

One of Josephus's goals in this passage was to defend Jews against the charge that they were hostile to all those not of their own race.⁶⁵ Moses did indeed exclude casual visitors, the merely curious, from participation in Jews' daily life. But he did this lest their customs be corrupted and not out of any hatred for members of other races. The preservation of a people's customs was a justification readily understandable to inhabitants of the Greco-Roman world. After all, one of the complaints of Tacitus and Juvenal against the Jewish way of life was that Romans who became sympathetic to it also held the Roman way of life and its customs in contempt.⁶⁶ Yet Moses also decreed that Jews should graciously receive Gentiles who chose to share in their customs or to live under the same laws with them. This was not a matter of birth only but also of a choice of this way of life. Josephus described this group in fairly broad and indefinite terms. They must have been more than casual visitors, more than merely curious. But he did not claim that they must accept all Jewish customs and laws or that the males among them must be circumcised. Indeed Josephus never mentions circumcision in his exposition of the Mosaic law in 2.145–286.⁶⁷ This omission can hardly be accidental. Rather Josephus meant his description of non-Jews whom the Jewish community graciously accepted to be somewhat elastic and to include the different kinds of people mentioned by Juvenal, not only those who eventually became circumcised and

⁶⁴There is a good deal of debate about whether words roughly translated as “God-fearer” (φοβούμενος, σεβόμενος, θεοσεβής) had a technical meaning, referring to Gentiles who were sympathetic to Judaism. The evidence for the first century comes from Josephus (*Ant.* 14.110, 195) and Acts (10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7), but it is unclear whether the terms are being used in a technical sense. The evidence for a technical use is stronger for the second and especially the third centuries. See Schürer, *History*, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 165–69; Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, 342–69. Juvenal, in the quotation given above, is clearly not using the phrase “Sabbath-fearing father” (*metuentem sabbata patrem*) in any technical sense, since he uses the same verb (*metuunt*) several lines later (101) in a different way.

⁶⁵See Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.239, 304–311; 2.89–111, 121–124, for some examples.

⁶⁶Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.1 (*GLAJJ* 2:281); Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.103–104 (*GLAJJ* 2:301).

⁶⁷Josephus does mention the practice earlier (*Ag. Ap.* 1.169–171) and defends it against Apion (*Ag. Ap.* 2.137–142).

fully converted to the Jewish way of life but also those whose association with the Jewish community was much more than casual but stopped short of circumcision and full conversion. Again it is unlikely that Josephus was taking a view peculiar to himself in this description. Rather he was describing the views and practices of the broader Roman Jewish community.

The Jewish community almost certainly would not have considered as Jews those who, though regularly associating themselves with the community and following many of its beliefs and practices, did not finally become Jews through circumcision. But how did these individuals see themselves? Given the state of the evidence, it is virtually impossible to say. It is not unlikely, however, that such people would have clearly seen themselves on the Jewish side of the Jewish-Gentile divide. Although they were certainly not members of the Jewish community in the strict sense, they may well have seen themselves as part of it in a somewhat enlarged sense. The Jewish community itself may also have considered them the same way.⁶⁸

It is impossible to determine the proportion between those who converted and became full members of the Jewish community and those whose commitment fell short of this. But one strongly suspects that the much larger of the two groups was made up of Gentiles whose association with the Jewish way of life stopped short of circumcision and full conversion. There are two reasons for this. First, adult circumcision in the ancient world was both painful and potentially dangerous. Second, and probably more important, was the social stigma attached to circumcision. Greek and Roman writers almost universally derided this practice.⁶⁹ Other aspects of the Jewish way of life sometimes found a sympathetic hearing, but virtually never circumcision.

To draw together all the strands of what we can know or plausibly surmise, the Roman Jewish community of the first century was fairly large, somewhere between twenty and fifty, but was not centrally organized. Rather the Jews of Rome were organized as local voluntary associations with no central authority. In addition, a number of Gentile inhabitants of Rome were sympathetic to Jewish beliefs and practices, especially monotheism, a superior ethic, observance of the Sabbath, and abstention from certain foods. They saw in the beliefs and practices of the Roman Jewish community a way of life superior to that of their fellow Romans. This superiority was also something emphasized by the Roman Jewish community itself. Some of these

⁶⁸This description does not fit easily into Cohen's seven ways of showing respect for Judaism, listed in n. 58, above. It is more than either no. 4 (practicing some or many of the rituals of the Jews) or no. 5 (venerating the God of the Jews and denying or ignoring all other gods) but less than no. 7 (converting to Judaism and "becoming a Jew"). The problem with Cohen's otherwise very helpful categorization is that, until no. 7, it does not take into account the significance of regular association with a Jewish community. He also does not take adequately into account the kinds of things that Jewish authors claimed and Greco-Roman authors admitted were attractive about Judaism to non-Jews.

⁶⁹Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.1.37 (*GLAJJ* 1:115); 16.4.9 (*GLAJJ* 1:118); 17.2.5 (*GLAJJ* 1:124); Horace, *Serm.* 1.9.69–70 (*GLAJJ* 1:129); Apion in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.137 (*GLAJJ* 1:176); Persius, *Sat.* 5.184 (*GLAJJ* 1:190); Petronius, *Sat.* 68.8 (*GLAJJ* 1:193); Martial, *Epigr.* 7.30.5 (*GLAJJ* 1:240); 7.35 (*GLAJJ* 1:241); 7.55.4–8 (*GLAJJ* 1:242); 7.82 (*GLAJJ* 1:243); 11.94 (*GLAJJ* 1:245); Tacitus, *Hist.* 5.5.2 (*GLAJJ* 2:281); Juvenal, *Sat.* 14.96–106 (*GLAJJ* 2:281); Suetonius, *Dom.* 12.2 (*GLAJJ* 2:301).

Gentiles, probably only a minority of them, eventually became circumcised and fully converted to the Jewish way of life. The majority, however, associated with the Roman Jewish community and accepted its beliefs and practices more selectively. Much of this evidence will be helpful as we now return to the history and character of the Christian communities of Rome.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OF ROME

Suetonius's notice in *Claud.* 25.4 that the emperor Claudius "expelled from Rome Jews who were constantly making disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus" means that the earliest believers in Jesus in Rome were originally members of the Roman Jewish community.⁷⁰ The most obvious aspect of this belief in Jesus was that this he was the Messiah, the Christ. How or when believers first came to Rome is not clear. No reliable evidence exists in later Christian sources, however, that there was a single founder (e.g., the apostle Peter). Certainly Paul's letter to the Roman Christian community gives no indication that there was such a person. More likely belief in Jesus as the Christ first spread to the Jewish community in Rome through the frequent contacts between Jews in Rome and Jews in Jerusalem and Palestine. As seen above, contacts between the Roman Jewish community and Jews in Jerusalem and Palestine were frequent.

This view is strengthened by the probable dating for the earliest presence of believers in Jesus as the Christ within the Roman Jewish community. The expulsion by Claudius described by Suetonius took place in 49 or at least at the end of the 40s of the first century. Belief in Jesus as the Christ must have been around long enough in the Jewish community to have taken root and to have gained enough adherents to make the Roman authorities notice the disturbance they caused in the community. This pushes the origins of believers in Jesus in the community back at least to the late 30s or early 40s. Given the very limited presence of Christian communities outside Palestine at this time, belief in Jesus probably arrived in Rome through Jewish Christians coming from Jerusalem and Palestine or through Roman Jews visiting Palestine, especially Jerusalem, and coming in contact there with Jewish Christians.⁷¹

Apart from Paul's letter to the Roman Christians (to which we shall return shortly), the next evidence we have for Christians in Rome comes from the Roman historian Tacitus's description of their persecution under the emperor Nero (*Ann.* 15.44). In July of 64 a disastrous fire sweeping through the city of Rome destroyed

⁷⁰On the Roman Christian community in general, see Rudolf Brändle and Ekkehard W. Stegemann, "The Formation of the First 'Christian Congregations' in Rome in the Context of the Jewish Congregations," in *Judaism and Christianity in First-Century Rome* (ed. Karl P. Donfried and Peter Richardson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 117–27; James C. Walters, "Romans, Jews, and Christians: The Impact of the Romans on Jewish/Christian Relations in First-Century Rome," *ibid.*, 175–95; William L. Lane, "Social Perspectives on Roman Christianity during the Formative Years from Nero to Nerva," *ibid.*, 196–244.

⁷¹This view of the origins of Roman Christianity within the Roman Jewish community is indirectly confirmed by Ambrosiaster in the late fourth century in the preface to his commentary on Romans (*In Epistolam ad Romanos*, part 1 of *Commentarius in epistulas paulinas* [ed. H. J. Vogels; CSEL 81.1; Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Temsky, 1961], 4–7).

or damaged ten of the city's fourteen districts. After the fire Nero contributed generously to rebuilding the burned-out districts of the city (15.43). But he also took 125 acres to build the Domus Aurea, a magnificent palace surrounded by elaborate gardens (15.42). None of Nero's generosity could prevent the public from suspecting that he had ordered the fire set in order to clear an area on which to build the Domus Aurea. Because of what it reveals about the Roman Christians in the mid-60s, Tacitus's account of Nero's attempt to find scapegoats for setting the fire bears quoting in full.

Therefore, to suppress the rumor, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, those whom, loathed for their vices, the crowd called Christians. The founder of the same, Christ, was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate. This pernicious superstition, checked for a moment, broke out once more, not only in Judaea, the home of the disease, but also in the city [Rome] itself, where all things horrible and shameful collect and come into vogue. First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, large numbers [*multitudo ingens*] were condemned, not so much for the crime of arson as for hatred of the human race [*odio humani generis*]. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd dressed as a charioteer, or standing in a chariot. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single person. (15.44) (Jackson, LCL)

Two things are clear from Tacitus's account. First, by the mid-60s, when these events took place, there was a fairly large number of Christians in Rome. Tacitus may have exaggerated the number for dramatic effect. But even granted the exaggeration, the events described indicate that there were a substantial number of Christians in Rome. The apostles Peter and Paul were probably executed in Rome during this time.⁷² Second, it is clear from Tacitus's narrative that by the mid-60s "Christians" were perceived by the emperor and the public alike as a separate group with no connection to the Jewish community of Rome. They even had their own name. There is not the slightest hint that Nero confused these Roman Christians with Roman Jews. And even though Tacitus was aware that their origins were in Judaea, he did not associate them with the Jewish way of life or the Roman Jewish community.⁷³

The contrast between what Suetonius tells us about believers in Jesus as members of the Roman Jewish community toward the end of the 40s and what Tacitus tells us about Christians as a separate community in the mid-60 is startling. In a period of less than twenty years, members of the Roman Jewish community who believed in Jesus as the Christ had become "Christians" whom the Roman authorities

⁷²From the end of the first century, *1 Clem.* 5–6 refers to the deaths of Peter and Paul as well as of a great multitude (πολὸν πλῆθος) of other Christians. *1 Clement*, however, does not explicitly mention Nero. For the explicit connection of the deaths of Peter and Paul to the persecution of Nero, see Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.25.5–7.

⁷³Brown, *Antioch and Rome*, 99, highlights both of these facts.

perceived as quite separate from the Roman Jewish community. How and when did these changes take place? The easiest way is to begin with Tacitus and work back to Suetonius. From what Tacitus tells us, it is likely that the break between these Christians and the Roman Jewish community took place some years prior to Nero's persecution. It is difficult to imagine that either Nero or the Roman authorities would have been able to single out Christians so clearly had their break with the Roman Jewish community taken place immediately before the persecution. This is confirmed by Paul's letter to the Romans, probably written in 56–57, which gives no hint that there was an organizational connection between his Roman Christian audience and the Roman Jewish community.⁷⁴ Although this is an argument from silence, it is a significant silence, given the issues Paul deals with in the letter.⁷⁵ Had there been any institutional relationship between the Christian community and the much larger Roman Jewish community, Paul would have had to deal with it in some fashion. In addition, Paul's letter assumes that the organization of the Roman Christian community was not only freestanding and independent but also stable.⁷⁶ This form of organization, then, had already been in existence for some years. This brings us back to Suetonius's notice of the disturbances within the Roman Jewish community in 49. What were these disturbances about? Why were they disruptive enough to come to the attention of the emperor Claudius and even lead him to expel at least some Jews from Rome? The most plausible explanation is that the disturbances were over the expulsion of believers in Jesus as the Christ from the Roman Jewish community. The number of these believers had grown to such an extent that they could no longer be treated as a small group with odd opinions. Their presence was significant enough that something had to be done. What resulted were their expulsion and the ensuing disturbances. The notice in Suetonius, then, points to two expulsions. The first was the expulsion of believers in Jesus from the Roman Jewish synagogues. This resulted in disturbances in the Roman Jewish community and led to a second expulsion, this time the expulsion from Rome by Claudius of those involved in the disturbances. Included in this expulsion were Jewish Christians such as Prisca and Aquila, whom Paul met when he arrived at Corinth early in 51 (Acts 18:1–3). This scenario offers the most plausible explanation, first for the disturbances within the Jewish community in 49, then for the origins of the independence of the Roman Christian community from the Roman Jewish community reflected in Romans in 56–57, and finally for Tacitus's description of the persecution of the "Christians" by Nero in the mid-60s.

⁷⁴Mark D. Nanos (*The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], 289–336) argues, on the basis of Rom 13:1–7, that Roman Christians were still part of the Roman Jewish community. But the reference to an authority's use of the sword (i.e., the power to execute) in 13:4 makes it impossible for 13:1–7 to be about Christian obedience to synagogue authority. Romans 13:1–7 is about obedience to Roman authority, not about submission to the authority of the Jewish community.

⁷⁵These issues include the proper role of the Mosaic law, the place of Israel in God's plan, and the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. All these issues run throughout Romans.

⁷⁶As we shall see shortly, the greetings in Rom 16:3–16 indicate that the Roman Christians were probably organized into house churches, based on the model of the organization of the Roman Jewish synagogues but independent of them.

Granted the basic accuracy of this scenario, four other important aspects of the Roman Christian community around the time of Paul's letter need to be clarified. The first is the makeup of the community. Were its members primarily Jewish Christians or Gentile Christians? From Paul's letter it is clear he thinks the majority of Roman Christians were of Gentile origin. In the elaborate greeting of the letter (Rom 1:1–7), Paul writes that through Jesus Christ “we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles [ἐν πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν] for the sake of his name, among whom are also you [ἐν οἷς ἐστε καὶ ὑμεῖς] who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (1:5–6). A bit later, in the thanksgiving section of the letter (1:13), Paul claims that he often intended to come to Rome “in order that I might reap some harvest among you as I have among the other Gentiles [καθὼς καὶ ἐν τοῖς λοιποῖς ἔθνεσιν].” Finally, toward the end of the letter, Paul justifies the fact that he has written rather boldly to the Roman Christians because of the grace given to him by God “to be a minister [λειτουργόν] of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles [εἰς τὰ ἔθνη] in the priestly service [ἱεροουργούντα] of the Gospel, so that the offering of the Gentiles [ἡ προσφορά τῶν ἐθνῶν] may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (15:16). Paul was very much aware that the members of the Roman Christian community were primarily of Gentile origin.

This obviously does not mean that the Roman Christian community was made up only of Gentile Christians. Romans 16:3–16 contains a long list of Roman Christians to whom Paul sends greetings. An analysis of the names shows that a clear majority of the Roman Christians were probably of Gentile origin.⁷⁷ Of the twenty-six names mentioned in this list, about sixteen of them were probably of Gentile origin.⁷⁸ Five or six of the names, however, indicate Jewish origin, either because of the names themselves or because Paul indicates they are Jewish.⁷⁹ In addition, at least some of the members of the household of the Jewish couple Prisca and Aquila (16:3–5) were probably Jewish. If the Aristobulus mentioned in 16:10 was the grandson of Herod the Great and the brother of Agrippa I, the same would hold true of “those of the household of Aristobulus” (16:10). The presence of these Jewish Christians in the Roman community around 57 also indicates that Claudius's expulsion was no longer in effect or at least no longer being enforced. This is especially the case for Prisca and Aquila, who were now back in Rome (16:3–4) after being expelled in 49 (Acts 18:1–3). The Roman Christians, then, were primarily of Gentile origin, but there was also a significant minority of Jewish Christians.⁸⁰ Given the

⁷⁷The most detailed analysis of the names in Rom 16:3–16 is found in Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten: Untersuchungen zur Sozialgeschichte* (2d ed.; WUNT 18; Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 124–53.

⁷⁸Epaenetus, Ampliatus, Urbanus, Stachys, Tryphaena, Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus, Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, Philologus, Nereus, and Olympas.

⁷⁹Prisca, Aquila, Andronicus and Junia (my fellow countrymen [τοὺς συγγενεῖς μου]), Herodion (my fellow countryman [τὸν συγγενῆ μου]), and possibly Mary.

⁸⁰Scholars often point also to other passages in Romans to clarify the makeup of the Roman Christian community (e.g., 6:17–21; 9:3–5; 11:13, 17–18, 24, 28, 30–31). These passages will eventually prove helpful in understanding the viewpoints of this community, but because of their strongly rhetorical character, they are best not used to clarify the makeup of the community.

fact that the Christian community had been separate from the Jewish community for only seven or eight years, most of the Christians of Gentile origin almost certainly had already been sympathetic to the Jewish way of life and been associated with the Roman Jewish community before the separation in 49.

A more difficult question to answer is whether or how the expulsion from Rome in 49 affected the ratio of Gentile to Jewish believers in Jesus and whether this ratio was again altered once some of those who had been expelled returned to Rome after Claudius's death in 54. There is no clear answer to either question, but two things can be said with some assurance. First, the expulsion of believers in Jesus from the Roman Jewish community in 49 marked a fundamental shift in the community to which these believers in Jesus, both Jewish and Gentile, belonged. Before the expulsion, these believers belonged to, or were associated with, the Roman Jewish community. After the expulsion, the community to which they belonged became a separate community independent of the Roman Jewish community and ethnically predominantly Gentile. This is a significant shift. But one should not misinterpret its significance. As we shall see a bit later in this chapter, this separate Roman Christian community probably still maintained many of its fundamental convictions about, and commitment to, the Jewish way of life. In other words, its members still saw themselves as rooted in, and still part of, the Jewish way of life, even though the Roman Jewish community saw it quite differently. Second, even when Jewish Christians such as Prisca and Aquila returned to Rome after the death of Claudius in 54, Paul's letter to the Romans indicates that the community still remained largely Gentile. The return of Jewish Christians did not fundamentally alter the makeup of the Roman Christian community. In fact, as we shall see, the controversies among the Roman Christians reflected in Rom 14:1–15:6 did not divide along Jewish-versus-Gentile lines. After all, Prisca and Aquila, who would have been on Paul's side of the argument, were Jewish.

A second aspect of the Roman Christian community was the social status of its members. An analysis of the names in 16:3–16 again offers some guidance.⁸¹ On the basis of their names, Prisca, Aquila, Urbanus, and Rufus were freeborn. Nereus, Hermes, Persis, Herodion, Tryphosa, Tryphaena, and Ampliatus were probably either slaves or freedmen or freedwomen. Julia, Junia, and Mary (if she was not Jewish) were freedwomen or descendants of freedwomen. For the other twelve on the list, there is no way to tell their social status on the basis of their names. The great majority of the Roman Christians, then, were probably from the lower social strata, slaves and freedmen and freedwomen. There were, however, some men and women of means among them. This was certainly true of Prisca and Aquila, at whose house one group of Christians met. It must also have been true for those at whose houses the two groups mentioned in 16:14–15 met.

A third aspect of the community was its mode of organization. The beginning and the end of Romans are again helpful. Both show that the Roman Christians were organized in ways similar to the decentralized structure of the Roman Jewish community from which they had been expelled. Like the Roman Jews, Roman Christians were organized as a number of voluntary associations. At the beginning

⁸¹ See Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 135–53.

of the letter, Paul refers to the addressees as “all God’s beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints” (1:7). This way of referring to the Roman Christians is unlike the way Paul described most of the other communities to which he wrote. With the exception of his letter to the Philippians, Paul referred to the Christian communities to which he was writing as a “church” or “assembly” (ἐκκλησία).⁸² At each place the Christians seem to have formed a single community, that is, a single voluntary association. Paul did not refer to the Roman Christians as a “church” probably because he knew that they were not centrally organized as one community but as several independent but related voluntary associations. Paul uses the word “church” five times in Romans 16. In four of the instances (16:1, 4, 16, 23), he means the church in particular places other than Rome. The only time he uses the word to refer to the Roman Christians is in the mention of the “church” at the house of Prisca and Aquila (16:5), as one church among others in Rome.

The structure of Roman Christianity as a number of voluntary associations also emerges from an analysis of the elaborate list of greetings in 16:3–16. Paul’s principle of organization for this list is not clear. But he seems to refer to at least five different house churches, that is, different groups of Christians who meet at the homes of individual Christians of some means: the church that meets at the house of Prisca and Aquila (16:5); those who belong to the household of Aristobulus (16:10); those who belong to the household of Narcissus (16:11); Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and those with them (16:14); and Philologus, Julia, Nereus, his sister, Olympas, and those with them (16:15).⁸³ Given that thirteen of these names are connected to particular house churches, one wonders whether the other thirteen names might also have been members of yet other house churches. This would mean that Paul knew of up to fifteen house churches in Rome. The latter suggestion may be too speculative. But the list in 16:3–16 strongly supports the view that the Roman Christian community was not centrally organized. Rather it consisted of at least five, and probably more, independently organized house churches.⁸⁴ It is also clear from 3:3–16, however, that these different house churches were not sealed off from one another. Paul wrote his letter to the house churches as a whole and expected that the Roman Christians would pass his letter around and read it in these different house churches. In this way his greetings would be passed on to their members. This combination of the independent organization of the communities

⁸²“To the church of the Thessalonians” (1 Thess 1:1); “to the churches of Galatia” (Gal 1:2); “to the church of God which is at Corinth” (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1); “to the saints in Christ who are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons” (Phil 1:1). The address in Gal 1:2 is “to the churches” because Paul was writing to several churches in a geographical area (Galatia) and not to a church in one city. The fact that Paul did not refer to the Christian community at Philippi as a church means that one must be cautious about making too much of the simple absence of the word in Rom 1:7. The significance of its absence there, however, becomes clear when one analyzes its use in Rom 16.

⁸³The heads of at least the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus were not Christian. How meetings at these places would have taken place is not clear. In effect, the meetings may have been restricted to only those of each household.

⁸⁴Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 301–02; William L. Lane, “Social Perspectives on Roman Christianity,” 202–14.

and informal but very real relationships among them reflects that found in the Roman Jewish community.⁸⁵

There was, however, probably one difference between the way the two different communities were organized. Because by this time the Roman Jewish community had been in Rome for at least 150 years and was much larger than the Roman Christian community, their meeting places were probably either existing buildings structurally modified to meet their needs or, less likely, buildings newly constructed for these purposes.⁸⁶ This was probably not the case with the Roman Christian community. Paul's way of greeting these communities suggests they met in private houses or apartments large enough to hold a number of people rather than in separate buildings or even spaces modified to serve their community needs.

A fourth and final aspect of the Roman Christian community was its beliefs and practices. Granted the ethnic makeup, social status, and community structure of the Roman Christians, how did they understand themselves? What can we plausibly say about their beliefs and practices at the time Paul wrote his letter to them? Were there any differences among Roman Christians about these beliefs and practices? In trying to answer these questions, we need to begin on a note of caution. The fact that the Roman Christian community was made up largely of Gentiles with a minority of Jews does not automatically tell us anything about their beliefs and practices. More specifically, it does not automatically mean that, as Gentiles, most of the community would have had no interest in the significance of the Mosaic law or in its observance.⁸⁷ There is ample evidence in earliest Christianity of diverse views about the relationship of Christian belief and practice to the Mosaic law and its observance.⁸⁸

Given the different relationships between Jewish and Gentile Christians in earliest Christianity according to time and place, what can we know or plausibly surmise about the viewpoints, practices, and differences in the Roman Christian community? As seen above, the Roman Christians were expelled from the Roman Jewish community in 49. By the time Paul wrote his letter to them in 57, they had been independent

⁸⁵This structure had changed, however, by the end of the first century. The openings of both *1 Clement*, from the end of the first century, and of Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Roman Christians, from the beginning of the second century, refer to the Christians at Rome as a church (ἐκκλησία). The community had become more centralized but was still without a monoepiscopacy.

⁸⁶For two somewhat different views on the issue of Jewish communal buildings in first-century Rome, see Richardson, "Augustan-Era Synagogues in Rome," 17–29, and White, "Synagogue and Society in Imperial Ostia," 30–68.

⁸⁷This view of Gentile Christianity was fairly common among an earlier generation of scholars, even in Rudolf Bultmann's classic *History of the Synoptic Tradition* (2d ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

⁸⁸Raymond Brown (Brown and Meier, *Antioch and Rome*, 1–9) lists four different groups. Group 1 consisted of Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts who insisted on full observance of the Mosaic law, including circumcision. Group 2 consisted of Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts who did not insist on circumcision but did require converted Gentiles to keep some Jewish observances. Group 3 consisted of Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts who did not insist on circumcision and did not require observance of the Jewish food laws. Group 4 consisted of Jewish Christians and their Gentile converts who did not insist on circumcision or observance of the Jewish food laws and who saw no abiding significance in Jewish cult and feasts. The Roman Christians fell into groups 2 and 3.

of the Jewish community for a relatively short time, about seven or eight years. This means that most of the Gentile members of the community almost certainly came in contact with belief in Jesus as the Christ through their association with the Jewish community and its beliefs and practices. They were drawn primarily from among the Gentile sympathizers. Even after their expulsion from the Jewish community, the beliefs and practices of most Roman Christians, not only Jewish but also Gentile, probably still included not only the centrality of belief in Jesus as the Christ but also continued acceptance of central Jewish beliefs and practices in which their belief in Jesus was embedded. Most Jewish and Gentile Christians would have been committed to Jewish monotheism and to observance of the ethical precepts of the Mosaic law. Indeed, they would still have been convinced of the ethical superiority of the Mosaic law over the ethical practices of the Greco-Roman world. Some, a minority as we will see, also would have observed the Sabbath rest and the prohibition of certain foods. The Roman Christians also would have carried over a strong sense of community from the Jewish community to their now separate community. Even though institutionally separate from the Jewish community, they still saw themselves as committed to and as part of the Jewish way of life.

This view of the Roman Christian community finds support from the text of Romans itself. Three sections in Romans are particularly helpful.⁸⁹ First, it is clear from 14:1–15:6 that there was tension in the Roman Christian community over observance of the Sabbath and the dietary regulations of the Mosaic law. In this section of Romans, Paul deals with the tension between the “weak” (ὁ ἀσθενῶν) (14:1–2) and the “strong” (ὁ δυνατός) (15:1) over two issues.⁹⁰ The first concerns eating or abstaining from certain foods. The strong think that one can eat any kind of food; the weak, however, eat only vegetables (λάχανα, 14:1–2). The second concerns distinguishing some days from others (14:5–6). The strong do not distinguish one day from another, but the weak do. These two issues, then, concern the continued observance of the dietary rules and observance of the Sabbath and perhaps other festivals of the Mosaic law. Paul’s own views clearly place him in the camp of the strong (14:14, 20): believers in Jesus are not obliged to observe either the dietary rules or the rules for the Sabbath of the Mosaic law. Yet in 14:1–15:6 Paul argues primarily on behalf of the weak. Among other things, he urges the strong not to despise the weak (14:3) and not to do injury to the weak for the sake of food and drink (14:15–17). Two points are especially important for our present purposes. First, this tension in the Roman Christian community is over two aspects of the Mosaic law that, as seen earlier, were attractive to Gentiles sympathetic to the Jewish way of life. Second and consistent with this, the tension is clearly not between Jewish and Gentile believers. Rather Paul describes the tension as one between the “strong” and the “weak.” This means that there were Jewish and Gentile believers on both sides of the argument. Some Roman Christians, both Jewish and Gentile, thought that both

⁸⁹For closer analyses of these sections, see ch. 14, below.

⁹⁰The best analysis of this section is John M. G. Barclay, “Do We Undermine the Law?: A Study of Romans 14.1–15.6,” in *Paul and the Mosaic Law: The Third Durham-Tübingen Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism* (ed. James D. G. Dunn; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 287–308.

sorts of regulations from the Mosaic law should still be observed; others, again both Jewish and Gentile, thought otherwise.

Second, despite their disagreements over these dietary and Sabbath rules, most Roman Christians seem to have been committed to observance of the ethical commandments of the Mosaic law. In Romans 7 Paul presents, among other things, a defense of the Mosaic law in which he tries to show that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (7:12, 14, 16, 22). Paul casts much of this chapter in the first person singular (7:7–25). A great deal of debate surrounds the identity of the “I” in this section of the letter. There is good reason to think that the “I” is not autobiographical.⁹¹ If it is not autobiographical, to whom does the “I” refer? The clue to the identity of the speaker is found in 7:7b–12, where the speaker describes his first encounter with the law and its results.⁹²

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to “desire” if the law had not said, “You shall not desire.” But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me every sort of desire. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment arrived, sin came alive and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me. So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.

The speaker of these words has to be someone who at first did not know the law and so did not know sin. Then there came a time when the speaker both came to know the law and tried unsuccessfully to observe it. The result was that only through the law’s commandment not to “desire” did the speaker come to know what desire was.⁹³ The speaker was once alive apart from the law, but when the law arrived, sin came alive and the speaker died. The transition from ignorance to knowledge and from non-observance to attempted observance does not fit with the speaker being Jewish. A Jew would have known the law from an early age. Rather, what Paul seems to be appealing to here, without explicitly saying so, is what he thinks was the experience of Gentiles sympathetic to the Jewish way of life who as adults came to observe the ethical commandments of the Mosaic law. They were born and grew up without the law, but as adults they took upon themselves its observance. Consistent with this, Paul’s emphasis in 7:7b–25 is clearly on the ethical aspects of the law and not on dietary regulations or ritual purity. Paul, then, must have thought of the Roman Christian community as made up of Gentile Christians most of whom had come to feel obligated to observe the ethical commandments of the law.⁹⁴

⁹¹The “you” in 8:2 indicates that Paul himself is not the speaker in 7:7–25. Other arguments against autobiographical interpretation of the “I” in 7:7–25 will be found in the detailed analysis of this passage in ch. 8, below.

⁹²As we shall see in ch. 8, below, this is an example of *prosopopoeia* (speech-in-character).

⁹³Paul is quoting the tenth commandment of the Decalogue. But he is clearly using it in the sense of “desire” (ἐπιθυμέω/ἐπιθυμία) rather than in the more restricted sense of “covet.” Paul’s emphasis is on the vice of desire so familiar to Greco-Roman moralists.

⁹⁴The role that this plays in Paul’s argument in this section of Romans will become clear in the analysis of Rom 7 in ch. 8, below.

Third, a passage from the very beginning of the letter further strengthens this view. Paul begins its first major section (1:18–3:20) with an indictment of Gentile religiosity (1:18–32). In it he first condemns Gentile failure to recognize God’s invisible nature from the things that God made (1:19–21). This leads to idolatry because Gentiles have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of mortal human beings, birds, animals, and reptiles (1:22–23). This in turn leads to the practice of various sorts of vices, especially those of a sexual nature (1:26–27, 28–29). There is nothing peculiarly Christian about this critique. Rather this section of *Romans* is very much of a piece with other Hellenistic Jewish critiques of Gentile religion and the immorality to which such religion leads.⁹⁵ This critique also clearly resembles what we saw earlier in Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 2.145–286. Integral to this critique and implicit in Paul’s indictment is the superiority of Jewish belief and morality. Yet the comparatively small compass within which all this takes place shows that Paul is not really arguing a case. Rather he is stating what his Roman Christian audience would have taken to be obvious. His critique of Gentile religiosity and morality would certainly have appealed to Jewish Christians living in Rome. Yet only several verses earlier (1:5–6, 13) Paul has recognized that most Roman Christians were of Gentile origin. Why, then, would Paul begin the first major section of his letter to them with an indictment with which he thought they would have easily agreed? Such an indictment makes sense only if these Gentile Christians were already familiar with, and shared with Jewish Christians, the same Hellenistic Jewish view of Gentile religion and morality as well as a conviction about the superiority of Jewish belief and morality. This again supports the notion that most Roman Christians of Gentile origin, even after their expulsion from the Jewish community, continued to be convinced of the superiority of the Jewish way of life, especially its monotheism and ethical precepts and practices.

Finally, there is one crucial aspect of the Mosaic law about which the Roman Christian community did not seem to have disagreed. At no point in *Romans* does Paul deal with the issue of the circumcision of Gentile believers. Given Paul’s views on this issue, especially in *Galatians*, this silence is significant. It must mean that entrance into the Roman Christian community by Gentile believers did not entail circumcision. Both Jewish and Gentile believers must have been in agreement on the issue; otherwise Paul certainly would have had to deal with it. This makes perfect sense, given the probability that most Gentile members of the community were drawn originally from sympathizers associated with the Jewish community rather than from full converts to the Jewish way of life. Part of the attractiveness for these Gentile believers would have been that, without the requirement of circumcision, they could be full members of the Christian community. Without circumcision this would have been impossible within the Jewish community. But this attractiveness, however, should not lead us to think that the other aspects of the Jewish way of life would have become less attractive to them. Those other aspects were what first attracted them to this way of life and continued to attract them as members of the Christian community. Paradoxically, apart from the Jewish community and without

⁹⁵ E.g., *Let. Arist.* 128–172; *Wis* 13:1–15:17; *Sib. Or.* 3:29–45, 184–187, 594–600, 764; *Ps.-Phoc.* 190–192, 213–214.

the requirement of circumcision, the ethnically Gentile majority among the Roman Christians could now, for the first time, understand themselves as full participants in a Jewish way of life. It was not something they would easily surrender or compromise.

This description covers the vast majority of Roman Christians. There was, however, within the Christian community one other group, whose members also saw themselves as participants in the Jewish way of life but whose configuration of it was quite different. This group, almost certainly fairly small, was made up of Prisca, Aquila, and other Christians whose views were essentially the same as Paul's. What these views were will become clearer in our next chapter. For the moment, let it suffice to say that, like Paul, they were convinced that Jewish and Gentile believers were now no longer obligated to observe even the ethical commandments of the Mosaic law as such. In addition to Prisca, Aquila, and the church at their house, this group probably included at least some of those Paul greeted in 16:3–16.⁹⁶ The most important, however, were Prisca and Aquila. They were prominent Christians who had been expelled from Rome in 49, and they were already at Corinth when Paul arrived there in 51 (Acts 18:2). There they came under Paul's influence and accepted his views about no longer being obligated to observe the Mosaic law. When they returned to Rome, they served as Paul's defenders. As we shall see in the next chapter, Prisca, Aquila, and these Roman Christians also served as the means by which Paul and the majority of Roman Christians came to know about each other's viewpoints.

CONCLUSIONS

What emerges from all these considerations is hardly a detailed portrait of either the Roman Jewish or Christian communities. At the same time, the evidence does allow us to sketch out important aspects of Roman Christian belief and practice in the middle of the first century. This is especially true of what must have been the complex relationship between the Christian community and Jewish beliefs and practices. A sense of this relationship will prove crucial for understanding the equally complex approach Paul takes to the Christian community in Romans.

It is clear from the evidence that the origins of the Roman Christian community lay within the much larger Roman Jewish community. In the late 30s or early 40s of the first century, Jewish believers in Jesus from Jerusalem or Palestine came to Rome. There they won over to belief in Jesus as the Christ some Roman Jews as well as some sympathetic Gentiles associated with the Jewish community. All of this took place within the Roman Jewish community. By the end of the 40s, however, serious conflict developed within the community over belief in Jesus. This led to the expulsion of both Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus from the Jewish community. The number of these believers must have been large enough that the disturbances caused by their expulsion came to the attention of the Roman authorities. As a re-

⁹⁶In addition to Prisca and Aquila, this included at least Epaenetus (the firstfruits of Paul's efforts in Asia), Andronicus and Junia (fellow Jews and prisoners with Paul), and Urbanus (a fellow worker of Paul's). It also may have included others on the list.

sult, the emperor Claudius in 49 expelled from Rome at least some of those involved in these disturbances.

By the time Paul wrote to the Roman Christians in 57, the Christian community had been separate from the Jewish community for seven or eight years. The Christians' organizational structure was similar to the decentralized structure of the Jewish community from which they had been expelled. They were organized as the separate house churches reflected in Paul's greetings in 16:3–16. Like the Jewish community, they would have been seen by the Roman authorities as voluntary associations, although not nearly as large and without the facilities available to the Jewish community.

From its beginning as a separate community in 49, the Roman Christian community was probably made up mostly of members who were ethnically Gentile. Even though by the time of Paul's letter many or most of those expelled from Rome had returned after Claudius's death in 54, this did not seem to have significantly altered the ratio of Gentile Christians to Jewish Christians. Even before 49, when they were still part of the Jewish community, belief in Jesus may already have been attractive especially to Gentiles associated with the Jewish community. In any case, the disagreements, reflected in 14:1–15:6, within the Christian community over observance of the Sabbath and dietary regulations did not break down along the lines of Jewish Christians versus Gentile Christians.

The continuity between the beliefs and practices of Roman Christians at the time of Romans and the Jewish way of life is striking. There are clear similarities between their beliefs and practices and what Gentiles found attractive in Jewish belief and practices as they were reflected in Roman writers such as Tacitus and Juvenal, on the one hand, and in a Jewish writer such as Josephus in *Ag. Ap.* 2:145–286, on the other. Obviously what distinguished Roman Christians from Roman Jews was the former's belief in Jesus as the Christ. But in other significant ways, Roman Christian belief and practice remained of a piece with Roman Jewish belief and practice. At first, this might seem counterintuitive, especially since the Christians had been expelled from the Jewish community and forced to form their own communities. Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that the Christians did not see themselves as members of a new religion. Even though now institutionally separate from the Jewish community and made up primarily of Gentile believers, they continued to see themselves as still connected with, and as part of, the Jewish way of life and its central beliefs and practices.

In this they did not differ from other Christians of the mid-first century, including Paul and the communities he founded. It is important, however, to get as clear a sense as possible of how they understood that continuity of belief and practice, because their understanding of it differed significantly from that of Paul and the small group of Roman believers such as Prisca and Aquila who agreed with Paul. This will also affect how we understand Paul's rhetorical strategy in Romans. The continuity was rooted first of all in Jewish monotheism, belief in one God and the rejection of all others. In addition, it included an emphasis on the superiority of the Mosaic law, specifically its ethical aspects, over what they saw as the degrading ethical practices of the Greco-Roman world. This was especially the case in areas of sexual morality. For a minority of the community, it also included continued observance

of the Sabbath and perhaps other festivals as well as observance of some of the dietary laws; these aspects were a matter of controversy among the Roman Christians. There was, however, no demand that male Gentile believers undergo circumcision, and so no controversy over this.

Taken together, these beliefs and practices reflect a commitment to aspects of the Jewish way of life that both Roman writers and the Jewish writer Josephus emphasized as attractive to Gentiles who sympathized and associated with the Jewish community, but without the requirement of circumcision or, for most of the community, observance of the Sabbath and the festivals or the dietary and purity regulations. Without the latter, both Jewish and Gentile believers came to stand on the same footing. The result was that Gentile believers were no longer only sympathizers associated with the Jewish way of life but were now full participants.

The belief in Jesus as the Christ by both ethnically Jewish and Gentile believers was deeply embedded in what both regarded as the superiority of the Jewish way of life in its monotheism and in its ethical precepts. Conversely, they would have found it difficult, even impossible, to understand how anyone could be a believer in Jesus without also accepting the continued observance of the ethical commandments of the Mosaic law. Any challenge to the sanctity of this law or to observance of its ethical precepts would have appeared to them as perverse. As we shall see, they saw in Paul just such a challenge.