

## *Christianity Under Claudius*<sup>1</sup>

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### I

The Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) ought to be twice as well known to readers of the New Testament as any other Roman Emperor, because the New Testament mentions him by name twice, whereas no other emperor is named more than once.<sup>2</sup> We meet Augustus in Luke ii. 1 and Tiberius in Luke iii. 1, but Claudius appears twice in the Acts of the Apostles—once in xi. 28, where we are told of a great famine which broke out in his reign, and again in xviii. 2, where he is said to have "commanded all the Jews to leave Rome". It is noteworthy, in passing, that the only New Testament writer who so much as refers to a Roman Emperor by name is Luke; this is one indication of his concern to place the story of Christian origins within the context of world history.

Luke's earlier reference to Claudius need not detain us: we know from other sources that his reign was marked by a series of droughts,<sup>3</sup> and the particular famine mentioned in Acts was probably that which Josephus places in the procuratorships of Cuspius Fadus and Tiberius Julius Alexander (i.e. between A.D. 44 and 48), when Helena, queen-mother of Adiabene and a Jewish proselyte, bought grain in Egypt and figs in Cyprus for distribution to the distressed inhabitants of Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> Since the Church of Antioch at the same time raised a famine-relief fund for the Church of Jerusalem, and entrusted its administration to Barnabas and Paul,<sup>5</sup> the correlation of Luke with Josephus at this point provides us with one approximate Chronological indication for apostolic history.

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Luke's second reference to Claudius, however, is much more important. In consequence of an imperial order expelling Jews from Rome, Aquila and Priscilla made their way to Corinth and had not been there long before they joined forces with Paul. An imperial order affecting Jews thus plays its part in the history of early Christianity. And here we should remind ourselves that, while we with our hindsight can distinguish between Jews and Christians as early as the reign of Claudius, no such distinction could have been made at that time by the Roman authorities. For them, "Christianity under Claudius" would not have been isolated from the fortunes of the Jewish people throughout the Empire during his reign. Jews and Christians themselves would be aware of the distinction a considerable time before the Roman authorities began to appreciate it—a fact which emerges clearly enough from the Gallio incident in Acts xviii. 12 ff., at which we shall look in due course.

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<sup>1</sup> A lecture delivered in the Library series of public lectures.

<sup>2</sup> Nero is referred to as Caesar (Acts xxv. 8 ff.) and Augustus (Acts xxv. 25), but not by his personal name.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Suetonius, Claudius 18.2 ("assiduas sterilitates").

<sup>4</sup> *Ant.* iii. 320; xx. 51 ff., 101.

<sup>5</sup> Acts xi. 28 ff.; xii. 25 (with Gal. ii. 1-10).

## II

The principate of Claudius's nephew and predecessor, Gaius (A.D. 37-41), was a time of anxiety for the Jews, which reached its climax when Gaius gave orders for the erection of his statue in the temple at Jerusalem, so that he might receive divine honours from the Jews as he did from his other subjects.<sup>6</sup> This crisis was resolved at the eleventh hour, but it was not soon forgotten. Another critical situation developed around the same time in Egyptian Alexandria, where there had been a large Jewish community practically from the time of its foundation in 332 B.C. The long-standing animosity between the Greek and Jewish inhabitants of that city flared up into open violence in A.D. 38 and the Jewish community had to endure first a series of vexatious administrative restrictions at the hands of the civic authorities and then brutal outrages at the hands of the city mob. This anti-Jewish activity involved an attack on the special privileges which the Jewish community of Alexandria had long enjoyed, and which had been confirmed by successive Roman rulers. A deputation of Alexandrian Jews therefore went to Rome to make representations to Gaius on behalf of their community, but

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received no satisfaction from him.<sup>7</sup> Claudius, however, when he came to power, issued an edict reaffirming their traditional privileges and directing the Greek and Jewish communities of Alexandria to desist from further strife.

This edict is reproduced by Josephus in a form which appears to be substantially accurate.<sup>8</sup> But we have a copy of another document from the same period which throws further light on the situation. This is a letter sent by Claudius to the people of Alexandria, published by order of the prefect of Egypt and copied on the verso of a papyrus roll which was acquired by the British Museum in 1921.<sup>9</sup> The letter was sent to the Alexandrines in response to an embassy which they had sent to Claudius to congratulate him on his accession, to ask his permission to pay him various honours, and to state the city's case with regard to the recent outbreaks against the Jews. (They probably judged this last matter to be particularly urgent in view of the close friendship which was known to exist between Claudius and Herod Agrippa, king of the Jews.) The letter, as it stands in the papyrus, has no date, but the prefect's preamble is dated "Year 2 of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus Imperator, 14th day of the month New August".

In the letter Claudius deals one by one with the points raised by the embassy of Alexandrines. The section which concerns us contains his reply to their representations about the anti-Jewish excesses in their city. It runs thus:

With regard to the question which of the two sides was responsible for the rioting and civil strife—or rather, if the truth must be told, the war—against the Jews, I am not disposed to pass definite judgment, although your ambassadors, especially Dionysius the son of Theon, pleaded your cause zealously and at length against the other side. But I do reserve irrevocable anger against those who started it again. Now I tell you plainly that if you do not desist from this destructive and obstinate animosity against one another, I

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<sup>6</sup> *Jos. Ant.* xviii. 261 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Philo, In *Flaccum* and *Legatio ad Gaium*; *Jos. Ant.* xviii. 257 ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Jos. Ant.* xix. 279 ff.

<sup>9</sup> See the *editio princeps* in H. I. Bell, *Jews and Christians in Egypt* (1924), pp. 1 ff.

shall be compelled to show what a benevolent ruler is capable of when he is moved to righteous anger.<sup>10</sup>

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Therefore I adjure you now once more that the Alexandrines for their part conduct themselves in a considerate and neighbourly manner towards the Jews who have lived in the same city for a long time, and offer them no outrage in the practice of their customary divine worship but allow them to follow their customs as they did in the time of the deified Augustus—customs which I too have confirmed after listening to both parties. The Jews, on the other hand, I bid for their part not to agitate for more than they have previously enjoyed, and never again to send two embassies, as though they lived in two separate cities—the like of which has never happened before. Moreover, they must not engage in contests for such posts as gymnasiarch or games director, but should rest content with what belongs to them by right and enjoy an abundance of all good things in a city which is not theirs. They must not bring in or invite Jews who sail in from Syria or Egypt; this is the sort of thing which will compel me to have my suspicions redoubled. Otherwise I will proceed against them with the utmost severity for fomenting a general plague which infests the whole world. If on both sides you are willing to desist from this behaviour and live in mutual consideration and neighbourliness, I for my part will show that long-standing friendly interest in your city with which my family has had close relations since my ancestors' days.

Much in this section of the letter, relating to the constitutional relations between the Jewish and Greek communities in Alexandria, is irrelevant to our present purpose. But one part of it would have a direct relevance, if a certain interpretation of it could be established. This is the ban which Claudius places on the introduction into Alexandria of Jews from Syria or Egypt. This has been interpreted—more particularly by Salomon Reinach<sup>11</sup>—as a reference to disturbances within the Jewish community of Alexandria caused by the introduction of Christianity to that city, and confirmatory evidence has been sought by linking the emperor's severe words about "a general plague which infests the whole world" with the language used by Tertullus when he was conducting the Sanhedrin's prosecution of Paul before Felix: "we have found this fellow a perfect plague" (Acts xxiv. 5).

The origins of Alexandrian Christianity form an obscure and fascinating subject. There is certainly every probability in the

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view that Christianity had found its way to Alexandria by A.D. 41. Hellenistic disciples who left Jerusalem after Stephen's death (c. A.D. 33) are as likely to have gone to Alexandria as to Antioch; the appearance of the Alexandrian disciple Apollos at Ephesus and Corinth in A.D. 52 (Acts xviii. 24 ff.) is a factor of special importance in this connection. But it is difficult to

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<sup>10</sup> Claudius's threat "to show what a benevolent ruler is capable of when he is moved to righteous anger was seriously meant, as is clear from his severe action against Isidore and Lampo in A.D. 53. Cf. H. A. Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* (1954), pp. 18 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Orpheus (1931), p. 244. Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, *The Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church* (1951), pp. 222 f.; H. J. Cadbury, *The Book of Acts in History* (1955), pp. 116 f.; E. M. Blaiklock, *Out of the Earth* (1957), p.37 ("This letter... appears to contain the first secular reference to Christian missionaries"). Some writers who discern a reference to Jewish Christians here are prone to emphasize the sailing in of Jews from Syria and to overlook the sailing of others down the Nile from Egypt.

trace any allusion to Christians in the emperor's letter. The unrest to which he refers was unrest between the Greek and Jewish communities of the city, not within the Jewish community. The Jews who were sailing in from Syria are placed on the same footing as the Jews who sailed down the Nile to Alexandria from other parts of Egypt. There were many Jews in Egypt apart from those of Alexandria, but they did not enjoy the special privileges granted to their brethren in Alexandria. The significance of the illegal Jewish immigration into Alexandria from Syria and the rest of Egypt is probably to be found in the statement of Josephus that the Jews of Alexandria, having obtained no satisfaction from Gaius, took up arms when the news of his death arrived.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, they prepared to attack the Greek Alexandrines, and in these circumstances it was only natural that they should try to augment their strength by inviting their fellow-Jews from other parts of Egypt and from Syria and Palestine to come to their aid. Such a situation would amply account for the severity of the emperor's admonition to stop this at once.

But why should Claudius speak of this situation in terms of "a general plague which infests the whole world"? The language suggests that there had already been trouble with Jews in other parts of the empire. Have we any evidence of such trouble elsewhere?

### III

The late second-century historian Dio Cassius supplies us with what may be a piece of relevant information here. Dealing with the first year of Claudius, he gives some examples of the emperor's moderation, and adds:

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When the Jews [*sc.* of Rome] had again multiplied to a point where their numbers made it difficult to expel them from the city without a riot, he did not directly banish them, but forbade them to gather together in accordance with their ancestral way of life.<sup>13</sup>

The point of Dio's statement that the Roman Jews had again multiplied is, no doubt, that they had been banished from the City by Tiberius some twenty-two years previously.<sup>14</sup> That earlier edict of expulsion had, however, become a dead letter, especially (we may suppose) after the fall of Sejanus in A.D. 31. But why should their increasing numbers move Claudius to place restrictions on them? Perhaps because there were already signs of that unruly and turbulent behaviour which led him, about eight years later, to decree their absolute expulsion from the capital. Christianity was not the only "messianic" movement abroad among the Jews in this period, although it is as probable that Christianity had reached Rome by the beginning of Claudius's reign as that it had reached Alexandria by that date. At any rate, if Claudius had already experienced some trouble with the Jews of Rome, we can understand better the sharpness with which he warned the Jews of Alexandria not to foment a similar plague there by an illegal increasing of their numbers.

But it may be asked whether it is probable that Claudius took such drastic action so early against the Roman Jews in view of his promptitude in confirming, at the beginning of his reign, the privileges granted by his predecessors to Jews throughout the Empire, and even

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<sup>12</sup> *Ant.* xix. 278.

<sup>13</sup> *Dio, Hist.* lx. 6.

<sup>14</sup> *Philo, Leg.* 159 ff.; *Jos. Ant.* xviii. 65, 81 ff.; *Tac. Ann.* ii. 85; *Suet. Tib.* 36.

more so in view of his friendship with Herod Agrippa. Agrippa was in Rome at the time of the assassination of Gaius and the accession of Claudius in January of A.D. 41, and not only performed for the corpse of the dead emperor such elementary decencies as others were afraid to perform, but encouraged Claudius to accept the imperial power which was being thrust upon him by the praetorian guards.<sup>15</sup> Is it likely that Claudius would so quickly place restrictions on the fellow-nationals and co-religionists of a man whom he himself delighted to honour? May it not be that Dio Cassius has antedated the

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action against the Jews of Rome which other writers ascribe to a later point in Claudius's reign? The answer to this latter question is that it is unlikely that Dio is referring to the same occasion as those other writers: they say that Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome; Dio says that he did not expel them, but put restrictions on their assembling together. It is a reasonable inference that, when these measures proved inadequate to deal with the trouble, he took more drastic steps later. As for the suggested inconsistency between restrictions on their liberty so early in his reign and the official and unofficial acts which reveal his good will at that time to the Jews in general and to Herod Agrippa in particular, it may be said that no amount of good will on the emperor's part or personal influence on Herod Agrippa's part could make the emperor close his eyes to anything that seemed to threaten the public peace of the Capital. Professor Momigliano's observation is apposite: "Judaism was at once a faith and a people. True to his policy of favouring provincials, Claudius desired to remain on good terms with the people, but to suppress any proselytizing activities of the faith, now increased by the new ferment of a Christianity still indistinguishable from the synagogue."<sup>16</sup> The reference to "the new ferment of a Christianity still indistinguishable from the synagogue is more relevant to Claudius's later action against the Jews of Rome, but that the earlier trouble was bound up with some aspect of the Jewish religion may be inferred from Dio's statement that Claudius "forbade them to gather together in accordance with their ancestral way of life".

#### IV

When we come to Claudius's later action against the Jews of Rome, we find ourselves on firmer ground with regard to Christianity. According to Acts xviii. 2, it was just after Paul came to Corinth that he met Aquila and Priscilla, who had recently had to leave Rome in consequence of Claudius's edict of expulsion. Paul nowhere suggests that Aquila and Priscilla

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were converts of his, and the impression we gain is that they were already Christians when he made their acquaintance. That Christianity had been brought to Rome by this time—that, in fact, its propagation within the Jewish community of the capital had much to do with Claudius's edict—is the natural inference from the statement of Suetonius that "because the Jews of Rome were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus (*impulsore Chresto*) he expelled them from the city".<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Jos. Ant.* xix. 236 ff.

<sup>16</sup> A. Momigliano, *Claudius* (1934), p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> *Suet. Claud.* 25.4.

Although Christianity was indistinguishable from Judaism in the time of Claudius, it was perfectly distinguishable by the time when Suetonius wrote (c. A.D. 120), and it was well known that it had been founded by Christ (Christus, not unnaturally confused with the common slave-name Chrestus, which was pronounced in practically the same way). It is just conceivable that the riots mentioned by Suetonius were caused by the activity of an otherwise unknown Chrestus, but in that case he would probably have said "at the instigation of a certain Chrestus" (*impulsore Chresto quodam*). It is more natural to suppose that he intended his readers to understand that Chrestus who, as a matter of general knowledge, was the founder of Christianity. To be sure, Christ was not in Rome in the time of Claudius<sup>18</sup>; but Suetonius, writing seventy years later, may have thought that he was. If his sources indicated that the riots which provoked Claudius's edict of expulsion were due to the introduction and propagation of Christianity in the capital, he could well have drawn the mistaken inference that it had been introduced there by Christ in person. Tacitus was better informed; he knew that Christ was crucified under Tiberius<sup>19</sup>; but such accuracy required a degree of research for which others had neither the interest nor the inclination. At any rate, our inference from Suetonius that the riots were due to the recent introduction of Christianity into the Jewish colony at Rome agrees well enough with our independent inference from the New Testament

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that Aquila and Priscilla were Christians before they came to Corinth.<sup>20</sup>

When did this expulsion of Jews from Rome take place? Paul's residence of eighteen months in Corinth can be dated within fairly narrow limits by inscriptional evidence for the date of Gallio's proconsulship of Achaia<sup>21</sup>; we shall not be far out if we say that Paul arrived in Corinth in the late summer or autumn of A.D. 50. But when he arrived, Aquila and Priscilla were already in residence there; the decree of expulsion therefore cannot be dated later than A.D. 49. This, as it happens, is precisely the year to which Orosius dates it. "In his ninth year", says Orosius,<sup>22</sup> "Josephus reports that the Jews were expelled from the capital by Claudius." The reference to Josephus is strange; our extant texts of Josephus contain no mention of Claudius's expulsion of the Jews, although Josephus does record Tiberius's similar action thirty years before. Perhaps Orosius's memory played him false; but his dating of Claudius's edict is probably right.

We have no certain means of dating the first introduction of Christianity to Rome. "Ambrosiaster was no doubt right in saying that the Roman believers" had embraced the faith of Christ, although they saw no sign of mighty works nor any of the apostles."<sup>23</sup> But when they "embraced the faith of Christ we cannot tell. The fact that "visitors from Rome, both

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<sup>18</sup> To the contrary, R. Graves and J. Podro, *Jesus in Rome* (1957), pp. 38 ff. H. W. Montefiore ("Josephus and the New Testament", *Nov. Test.* iv [1960], p. 139 n. 2) says "Suetonius is here referring to the influence of the risen Christ; but that is the Christian reader's interpretation, not the pagan writer's intention.

<sup>19</sup> *Annals* xv. 44.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. A. Harnack, "Probabilia über die Adresse and den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefs", *ZNTW*, i (1900), pp. 16 ff.

<sup>21</sup> In a rescript of Claudius to the Delphians dated to Claudius's 26th acclamation as *imperator* (W. Dittenberger, *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum* ii. 3 801), Gallio is mentioned as proconsul of Achaia. The evidence of other inscriptions (CIL, iii. 476, vi. 1256) points to the first seven months of A.D. 52 as the period of Claudius's 26th imperial acclamation. As a proconsul nominally entered on his office on July 1, it is just possible that Gallio became proconsul of Achaia on 1 July, A.D. 52, but more probable that he did so twelve months earlier.

<sup>22</sup> *Hist.* vii. 6.15 f.

<sup>23</sup> Preface to Commentary on Romans (*PL*, xvii, 48a).

Jews and proselytes are listed by Luke<sup>24</sup> among those who were present at the first Christian Pentecost in Jerusalem in A.D. 30 may have a bearing on the question; one cannot be sure. But in its earliest stages Roman Christianity was thoroughly Jewish, and long after the apostolic age it continued to exhibit

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certain features of its Jewish provenance—features, moreover, which seem to be more characteristic of nonconformist Judaism than of the main stream.<sup>25</sup>

This first, and almost completely unchronicled, chapter in the story of Roman Christianity comes to an end with Claudius's edict in A.D. 49. Christian and non-Christian Jews alike were expelled from the capital. But it is plain that, before many years had passed, both Christian and non-Christian Jews were back in Rome in full force, together with many Christians of Gentile stock. When Paul writes to the Roman Christians at the beginning of A.D. 57, he obviously writes to a flourishing community which includes many Gentiles, although it is not forgotten that its base was Jewish.<sup>26</sup>

We need not suppose that Claudius's edict of expulsion was formally rescinded, to permit of a return of Jews to Rome. Just as the similar edict of Tiberius thirty years previously appears to have become a dead letter with the passing of time, and certainly with that emperor's death, so Claudius's edict probably lapsed for practical purposes with his death. A new chapter in the history of Roman Christianity opens in A.D. 54, but this new chapter has no place in a survey of Christianity under Claudius.<sup>27</sup>

## V

We come now to what has been considered another piece of evidence for Christian activity under Claudius; if it is really that, then it is of peculiar interest and importance, because it suggests that the emperor himself was compelled to take notice of Christianity and to devise means of checking it.

In the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris there has been since 1878 an inscribed marble slab, part of the Froehner collection, The only evidence of its provenance is the note referring to it in Froehner's manuscript inventory: "Dalle de marble envoyée

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de Nazareth en 1878." The first person to pay serious attention to it was evidently M. Rostovtzeff, about fifty years after it was brought to Paris. He drew F. Cumont's attention to it, and Cumont published it in the *Revue Historique* for 1930, under the title "Un rescrit

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<sup>24</sup> Acts ii. 10.

<sup>25</sup> The main evidence is provided by the Hippolytean *Apostolic Tradition* (especially xx. 5); cf. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "On the Baptismal Rite according to St. Hippolytus *Studia Patristica II* (TU, Ixiv., 1957), pp. 93 ff. ; M. Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (1961), pp. 91 ff.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Rom. i. 8; xi. 13, 18.

<sup>27</sup> If Peter paid a visit to Rome "some time between 55 and 60" as T. W. Manson cautiously suggested (BULLETIN, xxviii (1944), 131), this could account for the speedy consolidation of Roman Christianity after A.D. 54.

impérial sur la violation de sépulture".<sup>28</sup> The inscription, which is in Greek, but was probably composed originally in Latin, bears the heading "Decree of Caesar" (Διάταγμα Καίσαρος) and runs as follows:

It is my pleasure that sepulchres and tombs, which have been erected as solemn memorials of ancestors or children or relatives, shall remain undisturbed in perpetuity. If it be shown that anyone has either destroyed them or otherwise thrown out the bodies which have been buried there or removed them with malicious intent to another place, thus committing a crime against those buried there, or removed the headstones or other stones, I command that against such person the same sentence be passed in respect of solemn memorials of men as is laid down in respect of the gods. Much rather must one pay respect to those who are buried. Let no one disturb them on any account. Otherwise it is my will that capital sentence be passed upon such person for the crime of tomb-spoliation.

The inscription is said to have been "sent from Nazareth to Paris; was it found in Nazareth? And if so, was it originally set up in Nazareth? If it was, then we may reach certain fairly precise conclusions about its date. The form of the letters suggests that the inscription belongs to the earlier half of the first century A.D.<sup>29</sup> But Nazareth is in Galilee, and we should not expect an imperial decree to be set up in Galilee before A.D. 44. Only in that year did Galilee become part of the province of Judaea, and so directly subject to imperial rule; before that it had formed part of the kingdom of Herod Agrippa (A.D. 39-44); previously it had formed part of the tetrarchy of Herod Antipas (4 B.C.-A.D. 39), and earlier still it had belonged to the kingdom of Herod the Great (37-4 B.C.). If the inscription belongs to the earlier half of the first century and yet cannot be dated before A.D. 44, the emperor whose decree it records would be Claudius.

Why, in that case, should it be necessary for a decree against tomb-spoliation to be given such publicity in Nazareth? And why should the penalty specified for the offence be so severe?

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Tomb-spoliation was no novelty; from ancient times tombstones and sarcophagi contained inscriptions warning offenders not to interfere with the contents.<sup>30</sup> Epitaphs from Hellenistic times repeatedly contain the warning that those caught in the act of tomb-spoliation will be fined a specified amount. But here the emperor in person takes tomb-spoliation in Palestine so seriously that he issues an edict threatening the death-penalty against it. Why?

One suggested answer is that the spread of Christianity had come to Claudius's notice, and that—antiquarian as he was—he made some enquiry into the origins of the movement. Finding that it had to do with one Jesus who was dead, whom his followers affirmed to be alive,<sup>31</sup> he would be told, in response to further questions, that what had actually happened was that when the body of Jesus had been buried, his disciples came by night and stole him away while the watchmen at the tomb were overcome by sleep.<sup>32</sup> Considering, then, that an

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<sup>28</sup> *Revue historique*, clxiii (1930), pp. 241 ff.

<sup>29</sup> G. de Sanctis, *Rivista di filologia*, lviii (1930), 260 f., lix (1931), 134, lx (1932), 129.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the sarcophagus of Ahiiram, king of Byblos (tenth century B.C.), and the tablet marking the reburial of Uzziah, king of Judah.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Acts xxv. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Matt. xxviii. 13.



act of tomb-spoliation had fostered a plague which was now infesting the whole world, he determined to impose specially heavy penalties on any repetition of such a crime, in Palestine at any rate. His order to this effect may have taken the form of a rescript to the procurator of Judaea or the legate of Syria; copies would be set up in those places in Palestine which were closely associated with the gospel story—in Jerusalem and Bethlehem, we may suppose, as well as in Nazareth. This interpretation has commended itself to so objective a historian as Momigliano.<sup>33</sup> There are too many uncertainties about the inscription to justify more than a tentative consideration of the possibility that it might have some bearing on the spread of Christianity in Claudius's reign, but this interpretation does at least fit in rather suggestively with other hints from ancient writers relating to the same period.

It may be that the Nazareth inscription (if it was originally a Nazareth inscription) was set up not earlier than A.D. 44. But

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perhaps it was set up not much later. For if Claudius had indeed developed an interest in the origins of Christianity, he did not have to look far for someone who could give him the sort of information he desired. His great friend Herod Agrippa certainly knew something about early Palestinian Christianity. It is he who appears in the record of Acts as that "Herod the king who took drastic action against the apostles in Jerusalem, executing James the son of Zebedee and attempting to deal similarly with Peter."<sup>34</sup> Herod Agrippa took Palestinian Christianity seriously enough to try to wipe out its leaders, and it is quite conceivable, not to say probable, that he had some conversation with Claudius about this subversive movement. But Agrippa could distinguish it from the main stream of Judaism more easily than Claudius could. When, some years after Agrippa's death (A.D. 44), the spread of Christianity within the Jewish colony in Rome led to increasingly frequent breaches of the peace, Claudius did not attempt to isolate the Christians in Rome and deal with them, but ordered the whole Jewish community to leave.

## VI

When Claudius became emperor in A.D. 41 Christianity was just beginning to spread into the Gentile world. It was taking root among the Gentiles of Syrian Antioch, and it may well have found its way already into the Jewish communities of Rome and Alexandria. When Claudius died, thirteen years later, the situation had changed very greatly. The southern cities of Galatia had been evangelized; so had the principal cities of Macedonia and Achaia, thanks largely to the activity of Paul. In most of these cities there were Christian churches whose membership was more Gentile than Jewish. And by the time of Claudius's death (October, A.D. 54) Paul had been hard at work for two years, with a number of colleagues, evangelizing Ephesus and the other cities of Asia, to such good effect that for centuries that province was one of the strongest citadels of Christianity in the world. Little more than two years after Claudius's death Paul could tell the Roman Christians that his work in the Aegean

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<sup>33</sup> Op. cit. pp. 35 ff.; cf. Cadbury, op. cit. pp. 117 f.; Blacklock, op. cit. pp. 32 ff. Some reservations are expressed by F. de Zulueta, "Violation of Sepulture in Palestine at the Beginning of the Christian Era", *JRS*, xxii (1932), 184 ff.

<sup>34</sup> Acts xii. 1 ff.

world was finished, and he proposed to set out for Spain to repeat in the western Mediterranean area the programme which he had lately brought to a conclusion in the east, "from Jerusalem and as far round as Illyricum".<sup>35</sup> For all the interest that Claudius may have taken in Christianity, he can hardly have realized how firm a hold it was taking of the Mediterranean world during his reign.

Two incidents in the course of Christian expansion under Claudius are worthy of attention; we turn now from actions or decrees of the emperor to the New Testament records. One of these incidents took place at Thessalonica quite early in A.D. 50; the other took place at Corinth, probably in the following year. Both relate to attempts to prosecute Paul.

## VII

When Paul, with his companions Silas and Timothy, came to Thessalonica, a few weeks sufficed for disturbances to break out within the Jewish community there similar in character, no doubt, to those at Rome which had recently led to Claudius's edict of expulsion. The Thessalonian citizens who had given hospitality to Paul were brought before the politarchs and charged with harbouring the men who had "turned the world upside down", men who flouted Caesar's decrees and proclaimed a rival emperor, one Jesus.<sup>36</sup> The language of the prosecutors, as Luke records it, suggests that subversive characters had been active elsewhere among the Jewish communities of the empire, and Paul and his companions were represented as being of their number. Paul's friends got him out of Thessalonica quickly for his own safety—and theirs. The accusation was a most serious one, and the politarchs could not afford to treat it lightly. The language in which it is couched fits very well into the general picture that can be built up of movements within the Judaism of the day, more or less "messianic" in character, which constituted a threat to public order in places where there were Jewish communities, and which were deplored and denounced by those responsible Jews who know the importance of maintaining acceptable relations with Rome. Paul the Roman citizen was

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certainly as appreciative of the *pax Romana* as any of those responsible Jews<sup>37</sup>; but it could not be denied that his apostolic progress from city to city was, more often than not, attended by public disturbances, and this could easily be turned to his detriment.

The two letters to the Thessalonian Church, which were written only a few weeks, or months at the most, after Paul's departure from their city, bear witness to an intense eschatological excitement among the Christians there, which may have been in evidence among the Jews also.<sup>38</sup> In both the epistles Paul finds it necessary to insist on a more sober outlook on the last things, and points out (more particularly in the second epistle) that certain events must take place before the day of the Lord dawns.

That day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called

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<sup>35</sup> Rom. xv. 19, 23 f.

<sup>36</sup> Acts xvii. 6 f.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Rom. xiii. 1 ff.

<sup>38</sup> The relation between these two letters was discussed by T. W. Manson in the BULLETIN xxxv (1952-3), 428 ff.

god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way.<sup>39</sup>

There are few New Testament passages which can boast such a variety of interpretations as this; but its life-setting and meaning have always seemed fairly clear to me. The predicted personal "abomination of desolation, standing where he ought not" (Mark xiii. 14),<sup>40</sup> must have appeared to many to be on the point of emerging when Gaius in A.D. 40 ordered the erection of his image in the Jerusalem temple. This order was cancelled just in time, but the terror and anxiety of those days must have left an abiding impression on Jews and Christians alike, and coloured their views of what would happen when Antichrist did in fact arise. When Paul visited Thessalonica ten years after that crisis he told his converts there about the coming day when lawlessness would manifest itself in all its evil, incarnated in

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"the man of lawlessness" who would go so far as to enthrone himself in the temple of God and claim divine honours beyond those paid to anyone or anything else. Now, in his second letter to the Thessalonians, he repeats this teaching and tells them that the day of the Lord will not come until Antichrist has appeared to lead the great eschatological rebellion against God. At present, he adds, the forces of lawlessness and anarchy are already active beneath the surface, but a restraining power prevents them from breaking forth. One day, however, this restraining power will be removed, and those evil forces will riot unchecked.

Paul tells his readers that they know what this restraining power actually is; perhaps he had already told them by word of mouth. But his readers today have not had the advantage of his oral instruction, and they are left to infer from the context the identity of the restrainer. The context suggests that it is the power of imperial law and order that at present imposes a check on the turbulent forces that are always threatening to break loose. This identification is further suggested by the fact that the restraining power is referred to both in the neuter gender, "you know what is restraining him" (τὸ κατέχων, verse 6), and in the masculine, "he who now restrains it" (ὁ κατέχων, verse 7). The imperial power was embodied in the emperor, and could thus be described in personal as well as in impersonal terms. This too could explain the very guarded language in which the restrainer's identity is hinted at. To speak openly in a letter about the coming removal of the imperial power or of the emperor himself would be impolitic; in view of the charges of seditious activity recently pressed against Paul and his friends in Thessalonica, the consequences for the Thessalonian Christians would be serious if a letter which seemed to lend colour to these charges fell into the wrong hands. On the other hand, if one of the other current interpretations of the restraining power is adopted—if, for example, Paul was referring to himself and his own apostolic ministry<sup>41</sup>—there would be no reason why he should not say so outright.

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<sup>39</sup> 2 Thess. ii. 3-7.

<sup>40</sup> In the Markan version the fact that the "abomination" is viewed as personal is indicated in that, while βδέλυγμα is neuter, the participle ἐσθηκότα referring to it is masculine.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. O. Cullmann, *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, xvi (1936), 210 ff.; J. Munck, *Paul and the Salvation of Mankind* (1959), pp. 36 ff.

But if Paul is thinking of the imperial power and the emperor, he is not thinking necessarily of Claudius himself, although some have envisaged a play on the idea of "restraint and the name Claudius (via Latin *claudo*). And he is certainly not looking forward to Nero, Claudius's stepson and eventual successor, as the "man of lawlessness" for Nero at this time was only thirteen years old. No: Paul was thinking much more of his own experience of Roman justice, which encouraged him to think of the empire as being—temporarily, at any rate—a safeguard against the unruly forces which endeavoured to frustrate the progress of the gospel. On the strength of this experience he could write of the imperial authorities several years later—when Nero had already been emperor two years and more—as "ministers of God"<sup>42</sup>; on the strength of this experience, too, he confidently appealed towards the end of A.D. 59 to have his case transferred from the jurisdiction of the procurator of Judaea to the emperor's court in Rome.<sup>43</sup>

### VIII

Not long after he wrote to the Thessalonians, Paul had probably his most momentous experience of Roman justice in relation to his apostolic work. In July, A.D. 51, when Paul was still in Corinth, Lucius Junius Gallio, elder brother of the philosopher Seneca, was appointed proconsul of Achaia, and held that office for a year.<sup>44</sup> Shortly after his arrival in the province, the Jewish leaders in Corinth accused Paul before him of "persuading men to worship God contrary to the law" (Acts xviii. 13). Their charge, as reported by Luke, is ambiguous; which law—Jewish or Roman—was Paul accused of breaking? On the whole, it is more likely that he was accused of breaking Roman law. Gallio, on dismissing the case, told them that he was not minded to be a judge in questions of Jewish law; but the prosecutors would have known that already. Their hope lay in convincing him that Paul's activity constituted a contravention of Roman law, which it was Gallio's business to maintain.

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Paul, that is to say, was charged with propagating an illegal religion—the implication was that what he was preaching was certainly not Judaism, which enjoyed the recognition and protection of imperial law except when its practice or propagation endangered public order.<sup>45</sup>

Gallio, however, summed the situation up quickly, as he thought. To him, Paul was a Jew like his accusers, and spoke the same sort of language as they did. If there were differences between Paul and them, these differences concerned interpretations of Jewish law and religion, and it was no part of Gallio's responsibility to pronounce judgement on questions like these. If public order had been endangered, if crime or misdemeanour had been involved, Gallio would certainly have taken the matter up. But it seemed clear to him that, although Paul's accusers tried to represent the apostle as offending against Roman law, the matter at issue was one of Jewish law. Accordingly, he had them ejected from the court, and turned a blind eye when the ruler of the synagogue was mobbed by the bystanders.

Sir William Ramsay regarded Gallio's ruling as "the crowning fact in determining Paul's line of conduct",<sup>46</sup> because it provided a precedent for other magistrates and thus guaranteed

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<sup>42</sup> Rom. xiii. 4, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Acts xxv. 11.

<sup>44</sup> Seneca, *Ep. Mor. civ.* 1 ; cf. p. 317, n. 2 above.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. S. L. Guterman, *Religious Toleration and Persecution in Ancient Rome* (1951).

Paul's freedom to prosecute his apostolic mission with the assurance of the benevolent neutrality of the imperial authorities for several years to come. One thing at least is certain: if Gallio had given an adverse verdict against Paul, it would have been pleaded as a precedent by Paul's opponents for the rest of his life; and a precedent established by so exalted and influential a magistrate as Gallio—a much more important personage than the politarchs of Thessalonica—would have carried great weight. The mere fact that Gallio refused to take up the case against Paul may reasonably be held to have facilitated the spread of Christianity during the last years of Claudius and the earlier years of his successor.

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<sup>46</sup> *St. Paul the Traveller and Roman Citizen*<sup>14</sup> (1920), p. 260.