

Breaching the 'Silence' on Early Christianity and Military Service: Paul and the Praetorian Guard.

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ABSTRACT

The New Testament records, accepted as authoritative by the Church which emerged from the Christian movement, include soldiers' encounters with the four leaders of the movement – John the Baptist, Jesus of Nazareth, Peter and Paul. There has been no convincing explanation of the subsequent 'silence' to these encounters, which is said to stretch from c. AD50 to AD170. The article takes the view that if a correlation can be shown between the key centres of Christianity and military locations along the Jerusalem-Rome axis, then it can be posited that the stories in the New Testament represent a continuing process of military interest in Christianity into the 2nd century AD. The first part of the article sets the scene and reasons for this view: the second part investigates the specific case of the Praetorian Guard through examining the significance of the mention of *πραιτωρίου* in Philippians 1:13.

INTRODUCTION

Historical silences are notoriously hard to penetrate and that regarding early Christianity and military service is no exception. Had this silence not led to sincere, but sometimes dogmatically, held convictions that there is an inherent incompatibility between the two parties and/or that early church was therefore pacifist, perhaps the question concerning their interaction might not be so controversial today in some circles. Three comments spanning the twentieth century illustrate the obstacles to breaching the silence. In 1925 Cadoux maintained that "after the at best doubtful cases of Cornelius and the Philippian gaoler in Acts, we have no reliable evidence of any Christian soldiers until we come to the reign of Marcus Aurelius."⁵⁶ Nearly 40 years later, Windass emphasised the lack of

56 C.J. Cadoux, *The Church and The World*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1925), 276. However, elsewhere in his monographs he writes: In discussing Cornelius "... the existence even of these few cases makes it possible that from the earliest times, there may have been soldier converts in the church" *The Early Christian Attitude to War*, 229. In *Church and the World*, 276.

“authentic evidence for the existence of a single Christian soldier after that of the New Testament until about AD 170”⁵⁷ Thirty years later Hunter unequivocally writes:

No Christian writer of the first two centuries actually deals directly with the question of the permissibility of warfare and military service for Christians. Furthermore this silence on the question corresponds to an absence of evidence that Christians actually participated in military service to any significant extent prior to the closing years of the second century. In short, there is no firm evidence either of participation in the army or of discussion of military service before the end of the second century.⁵⁸

These views are compounded by Wright’s statement that:

...we do not know very much and, failing major new discoveries, can never know very much about the first Christian century. It is desperately easy to cover over this ignorance with theory, to make hypothesis do where history will not.⁵⁹

Yet if interaction did cease after the conversion of the Philippian jailer c. AD50, but was prevalent again by AD170, certain questions arise. Specifically, a convincing answer is required to Swift’s comment.

Moreover, if the military profession were intrinsically incompatible with the Christian faith, it would be difficult

written six years later it is stated: “At the same time, the precedents recorded in the NT, apart from any other considerations, compel us to admit the possibility of the existence of Christian soldiers at any period subsequent to the early Apostolic age.

57 Stanley Windass, *Christianity Versus Violence*. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 10.

58 David G. Hunter, “The Christian Church and the Roman Army in the First Three Centuries.” M. E. Miller & B. N. Gingerich, eds., *The Church’s Peace Witness*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 166.

59 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*. (London: SPCK, 1992), 453.

to explain why John the Baptist said nothing about abandoning the service to the soldiers who came to him for advice (Luke 3:14) or why Peter had no reservations about baptising the centurion Cornelius (Acts 10) or why Paul was silent about the official responsibilities of the gaoler whom he converted at Philippi (Acts 16:27-34)⁶⁰

And if this attitude did change, answers are also needed as to when this happened and why. If a change of attitude can be shown, then, as there is no doubt whatsoever that Christianity and military service were again deemed compatible by the later decades of the second century AD, the when, how and why of a reversal of that change of attitude needs to be addressed.

It must be admitted that it would be an exercise in futility to try to answer these kinds of questions, firstly, because of the dearth of knowledge about the period in general. Helgeland bluntly states that “the lack of references to enlistment proves there is a lack of references to enlistment – nothing more.”⁶¹ Secondly, a recent history of early Christianity estimates that by the year AD100 there were only about 7-8000 Christians in the Roman Empire - about 0.01% of the population.⁶² To require evidence of numbers of soldiers converting to Christianity, when the same information is not being asked of other ruling, professional or occupational groups, thus seems spurious. Furthermore, according to the New Testament record, outside the trades/professions of the disciples and the various ruling authorities, only soldiers are stated as having significant encounters with all four of the leading figures in the early Christian movement – John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and Paul. This in itself is remarkable if Davidson’s figures are taken as a general guide.

60 Louis Swift, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service: Message of the Fathers of the Church*. (Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier, 1983), 19.

61 John Helgeland, “Christians & the Roman Army AD173-337.” *Church History* 43 (1974): 149-163, 150.

62 Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine AD30-312*. Vol.1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 101. The ‘estimate’ is emphasised since calculations cannot be verified but the general sociological consensus is that adherents to Christianity grew by between 2.5% and 4% per annum. The base figure for calculation is 120 in cAD33 – Acts 1:15).

Finally, ‘silence’ does not mean a cessation of activity. Hopfe’s comment aptly illustrates this statement.

Following Paul’s departure for Rome from the port of Caesarea in AD60, there is a period of one hundred and thirty years of silence regarding the Christians of Caesarea. Surely the Christian community of the city was active and growing between 60 and 189 CE as its vitality in the third century demonstrates.⁶³

Thus, if by AD170, “the tide of conversion is rising and there are many converts in the Army”, conversions must have started before this date. Since Roman soldiers served for a period of 20 years and some re-enlisted after this period or were ‘called up’ again as a reserve then such conversions could have occurred anytime up to 20-25 or more years before that date. Although at a much later date, the case of Julius the Veteran illustrates this point. He had re-enlisted and was subsequently martyred in the Diocletian persecution, having served for 27 years and “all the while I have worshipped in reverence the ‘God who made heaven and earth’ [a reference to Acts 4:24] and even up to this moment I openly serve him”⁶⁴

These general points serve as caveats to accepting that there is nothing to be gained by further investigation of a connection between early Christianity and military service. The New Testament does show that Christianity did make an impact on soldiers and further indications in the texts, for example, the military language used especially by Paul, suggest there is no sound reason for denying that the Movement continued to be of interest to soldiers.

63 Lewis M. Hopfe, “Caesarea Palaestinae as a Religious Centre.” *ANRW* II.18:4 (1990): 2380-2411, 2400. Hopfe notes that as a result of the conversion of Cornelius in that city (Acts 10) “Christianity had a natural interest in Caesarea Maritima almost from the beginning of its history.”(p2407). If that progress started with Cornelius and if it was continued by Philip (Acts 21:8), military exposure to Christianity cannot be denied.

64 Switt. *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* . 76.

CENTRES OF CHRISTIANITY AND MILITARY LOCATIONS

The history of Christianity contained in the New Testament and accepted as authoritative by the Church which emerged from it, shows that the Movement did have an impact on soldiers through encounters with its leaders, with actual or potential salvific outcomes in all cases. Thus, the critical foundation of the argument that Christianity made an impact on soldiers from the outset of the Christian movement is evidence for the presence of soldiers in the areas where, according to the New Testament writers, John the Baptist, Jesus, the Apostles and Paul conducted their ministries. The degree of both possibility and probability therefore, depends on a correlation between the main centres of Christian activity and a military presence. Hence, this article will maintain that a different line of enquiry can breach the silence and provide an alternative perspective on interaction between early Christianity and military service.

The following maps [Fig. 1 and Fig. 2] clearly illustrate the presence of military forces in places where the Gospel was preached and took root,⁶⁵ while Kennedy's chart shows continuing military involvement in these areas.⁶⁶ A sketch of geographical correlations and epigraphical data, however, are insufficient *per se* to provide a strong argument for an interaction between Christianity and military service. Fortunately, there is a consensus that military personnel in the East were based in towns and interacted with the civilian populations. For example, Tacitus⁶⁷ attests to close connection between soldiers and civilians in Syria and the Pliny correspondence

65 Maps compiled from various sources including: J. J. Bimson et al, *New Bible Atlas*. (Leicester: Lion/IVP, 1985), 67; H. M. D. Parker, *The Roman Legions*. (London: Clarendon Press, 1928); R.K. Sherk, "Roman Galatia." *ANRW* II.7.2. (1980): 954-1052, 996; Wm. M. & A. Margaret Ramsay, "Roman Garrisons and Soldiers in Asia Minor." *JRS* Vol.18 (1928): 181-190, 184; M. Spiedel, "Legionaries from Asia Minor." *ANRW* II.7.2 (1980): 730-746.

66 David Kennedy, *The Military Contribution of Syria to the Roman Imperial Army: Proceedings of a Colloquium held at Ankara in September 1988*. Monograph No 11. BAR International Series 553(1). (1989), 242-3.

67 Tacitus, *Histories of Tacitus: An English Translation*. G. G. Ramsay, (London: John Murray, 1915), 2:80, 187. At Antioch, Mucianus, Vespasian's general was able to win over the Syrian legions to Vespasian's cause by asserting that Vitellius was going to bring German armies to Syria and transfer the Syrian legions to Germany. But "the provincials delighted in their accustomed intercourse with the soldiers, united with them, as many of them were, by ties of blood and friendship..." joined with the soldiers to prevent the Syrian legions being transferred to Germany.

to the same interaction.⁶⁸ Sociological studies also make reference to soldiers being part of the Gospel communities, with Esler making the most explicit statement about this for Luke's community concluding that "there is quite a body of evidence to suggest that there were Romans in Luke's community."⁶⁹ The first examples given are centurions – a reiteration of the point made earlier in that work that centurion figures in Luke-Acts are a "prototype of the government officials who will later show such interest in the Christian message."⁷⁰ Esler's claims are corroborated by Robbins who writes, "Luke-Acts is produced in a social location where a number of centurions are members of the Christian community ... not simply outsiders looking in."⁷¹ Figure 2 gives a military overview to Meeks' affirmation that even "if we limit ourselves to the evidence from the letters of Paul and his immediate associates, then, we find that the Pauline movement took root in at least four provinces of the Roman Empire: Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Achaia."⁷² He adds that "the two Macedonian cities, Philippi and Thessalonica, that were so important to the Pauline mission were also important in the Roman scheme of control" and, significantly that the first colonists of Philippi included "a cohort of praetorians."⁷³

68 The Younger Pliny, *Correspondence*. E. G. Hardy. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1889), 296. Letter 100 speaks of "the soldiers and provincials vying with one another in loyal demonstrations" an unlikely contest if soldiers and civilians were kept at a distance from each other.

69 Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lukan Theology*. (Society for New Testament Studies) (Cambridge: C.U.P., 1987), 210. A general consensus is that Luke's works originated in Caesarea Maritima.

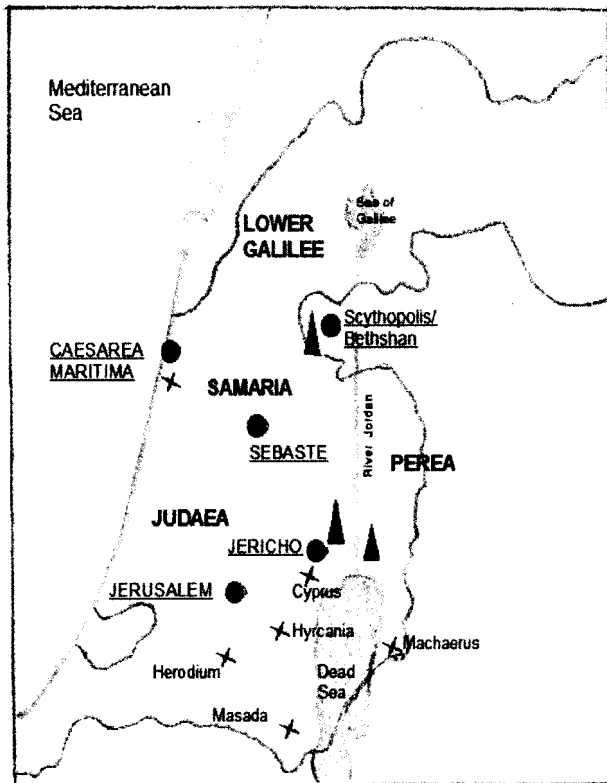
70 Esler, *Community & Gospel*, 37.

71 Vernon K. Robbins, "The Social Location of the Implied Author of Acts." Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts. Models for Interpretation*. (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 329-330.

72 Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*. (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1983), 42.

73 Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*. 45

Fig. 1 Military Locations in Palestine from the time of Herod the Great



Map adapted from Bimson, J.J. et al. *New Bible Atlas*. (Leicester: Lion T.V.P. 1985) p67

- Key fortified cities
- ✕ Key fortresses
- ▲ Probable areas of John the Baptist's activity

Fig. 2. Key Centres of Christianity and Military Garrisons along the Jerusalem- Rome.

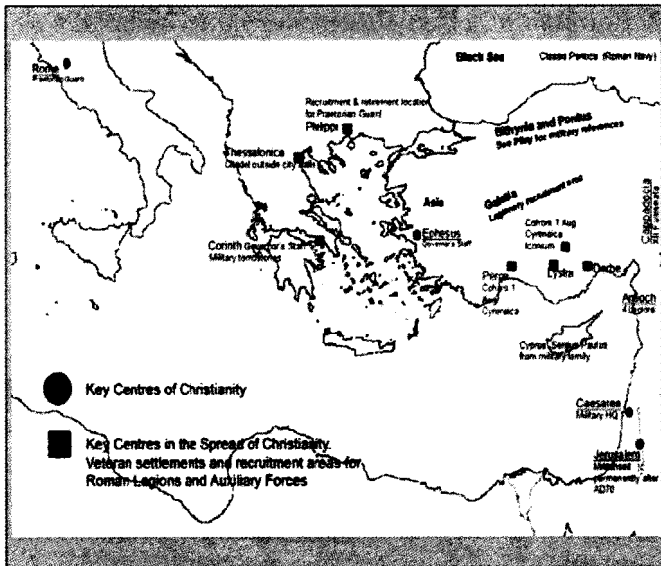


Fig. 3. Legionary Recruitment by area

Source. D. Kennedy. *The Military Contribution of Syria to the Roman Imperial Army*. Proceedings of a Colloquium held at Ankara in September 1988. Monograph No 11, BAR International Series 553(I) (1989) 235-243. pp243.

Eastern legionary recruits whose origins are known (after Forni 1953; 1974; Kennedy 1980:292

	Augustus to Gaius	Claudius to Nero	Flavians to Trajan	Hadrian to 3 rd century	TOTAL
Asia	3	2	4	5	14
Bithynia	3	0	30	6	39
Galatia	30	5	6	5	46
Pamphylia/ Pisidia	10	1	2	1	14
Pontus/ Cappadocia	4	4	2	0	10
Cilicia /Cyprus	2	0	0	11	13
Syria/ Palestina	5	3	51	54	113
Egypt	9	0	11	45	65
TOTAL	66	15	106	127	314

ROME

From this data it seems safe to conclude that if, a military presence, a Christian community and the circumstances which could result in military conversions, can be established, then there are reasonable grounds for maintaining that interaction between early Christianity and military service was an ongoing process even throughout the period of 'silence'. Fortunately, according to the available records, those elements existed side by side in Rome. The military presence in Rome is incontestable. The city was the undisputed, permanent base of the most *élite* unit in the Roman army – the Praetorian Guard; and also became the main centre for Western Christianity. Furthermore, Meeks' mention of the Praetorian Guard in association with Philippi, indicates that singular mention of the word *πραιτωρι&* in a letter to the Philippians (1:13) can assume added nuances. An investigation into Paul's use of the term, firstly, can be used to assess what impact Paul's imprisonment could have had on his military guards during that period and extending after his death. Secondly, it permits consideration of the fact that, in the Philippian context, a military connection can be established.

Modern commentaries are the obvious first choice of sources of information but are, unfortunately, less than helpful. For most, '*πραιτωρι-*' only "merits a brief word of explanation."⁷⁴ With the exception of Hendriksen, semantic and locational considerations determine the weighting given to the term. Discussion on whether the word means a 'building', 'place' or 'body of men', dominates the coverage. However, the consensus opinion emerging is that "Lightfoot's arguments", concluding that "Praetorium signifies not a place but a body of men",⁷⁵ "have never been overturned."⁷⁶ For Fee, this identification of the term as a 'body of men', leads to another important conclusion as it offers "the strongest kind of evidence for the Roman origins of the letter."⁷⁷ Both conclusions

74 Marcus Boeckmuhl, "A Commentator's Approach to the 'Effective History' of Philippians." *JSNF* 60 (1995): 57-88, 75.

75 J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistles of St. Paul: Philippians*. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1883), 101.

76 Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*. (N.I.C.N.T.) (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 113.

77 Gordon D. Fee, *Philippians*. (I.V.P. New Testament Commentary Series) (Leicester: I.V.P., 1999), 196.

find corroboration in Saddington's article. He cites Acts 28:16/Western text,⁷⁸ which refers to Paul being handed over to "ὁ στρατοπεδάρχος a term used for an administrator in the Praetorian Guard and adds "that Paul was initially handed over to him. Accordingly, on the present evidence, it seems likely that Paul was held by the Praetorian Guard."⁷⁹ Rapske⁸⁰ also assumes imprisonment by the Praetorian Guard in Rome and includes potential identification of this particular officer.⁸¹ Independently of this discussion, Speidel states that Julius, Paul's custodian, was "of a position and of a status that enabled him to deal with Roman officialdom in the capital"⁸² indicating this writer's acceptance of the Roman location of Paul's final incarceration. These sources thus establish a connection between a military establishment and the most potentially effective Christian advocate of the age.

That connection is described by Bruce. "It was natural that the soldier (relieved by a comrade every four hours or so) should be a member of the imperial bodyguard. News about this extraordinary prisoner would naturally spread through the Praetorian barracks."⁸³ Bruce's words, quite unintentionally, substantiate a further observation from Rapske. In his extensive study of Roman criminal custodial practices, he concludes that Paul was accorded "an extremely casual form of military custody"⁸⁴ and "amazingly loose custody",⁸⁵ which nevertheless included the permanent presence of a guard to whom Paul was bound by the wrist by a light chain. In itself, the nature of the arrangements would have been remarkable.

78 ὁ ἑκατονταρχὸς παρέδωκε τοὺς δεσμίους τῶν στρατοπεδάρχων τῶν δεκάτων Παύλῳ ἐπιτραπῆναι.

79 D. B. Saddington, "Roman Military and Administrative Personnel in the New Testament." ANRW II.26.3 (1996) 2409-2435, 2418.

80 Brian Rapske, *Paul In Roman Custody*. BAFCS: Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 173-191.

81 Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 174-177. He concludes that the officer was probably the subordinate of the *praefectus praetorii* and, as the head administrator, would have been responsible for deciding the nature of Paul's custody.

82 Michael P. Speidel & A. Dimitrova-Milceva, "The Roman Army in Judaea under the Procurators: The Italian and the Augustan Cohorts in the Acts of the Apostles." *Ancient Society*: 13-14 (1982-83): 233-240. 240.

83 F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*. (N.I.B.C.) (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 41.

84 Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 173.

85 Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 191.

This prisoner, who had appealed to Caesar, had arrived in the custody of a centurion with depositions from the governor of Judaea and the commander of the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem. His case had been heard before a king and his accusers had been among the leading Jewish élite. Yet Rapske affirms the Acts account that he was permitted to remain outside the barracks, with a single, regular-soldier guard and receive visitors at will.⁸⁶ Significantly, therefore, this reference in Philippians points to the only place where numerous soldiers, belonging to an undisputed, historically verifiable military ‘regiment’, are said to have been exposed to Christian preaching and teaching, which according to Acts lasted for two years.

The key question which then arises is: Did Paul’s preaching and teaching make an impact on soldiers? A clue is found in the words “εἰς προκοπὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἐλήλυθεν” in Philippians 1:12. If the gospel was simply a topic of conversation among the soldiers, why did Paul use the stronger (and more military) ‘προκοπήν’? It bears the connotation of empirical progress rather than the spread of idle conversation. Taking verse 1:13 in isolation, it could be argued that the gospel had been the means by which the reason for Paul’s imprisonment had been made known to his guards. Yet, it is somehow inconceivable that Paul would boast about the gospel providing him with a personal advantage, i.e., he may have been treated more leniently because he was not seen as a violent and/or dangerous political prisoner. Verses 12 and 13 need to be taken together to make sense of the cause of Paul’s imprisonment and the resultant spreading of the gospel throughout the Praetorian ranks. It is therefore possible, that the use of ‘προκοπήν’ in verse 12 was the safest way to inform his readers that his message had been effective. Support for closer attention to ‘προκοπήν’ comes from Thielman who notes that the term “appears only in one other passage in the New Testament (1 Timothy 4:15).” Hence its appearance at the beginning and end of this section in Philippians “probably has deeper meaning than is readily apparent, especially in translation.”⁸⁷ Given

⁸⁶ Acts 28:16, 30.

⁸⁷ Frank Thielman, *Philippians*. (NIV Application Commentary) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 59.

the discussion of the military character of the language of Philippians, researched by Geoffrian and Kentz, Thielman's opinion merits consideration. Paul does not make any claims about conversions among his guards and it is possible to assume from this silence that there were no soldier converts. However, Paul does not mention every person converted under his ministry by name and there seems no good reason for making exceptions here. Given his situation he could not have explicitly claimed converts among soldiers or named them. To do so could have had serious repercussions for both Paul and his guards if the authorities were to view such conversions as subversion. Indeed, for the security of the soldiers themselves and for others in Caesar's household, wisdom dictated non-disclosure: their fates could subsequently have been linked to his.

A second clue is the mention of 'Καίσαρος οἰκίας' in Philippians 4:22. It is sometimes assumed that members of 'Caesar's household included only civilians, freedmen and slaves. However, an unavoidable conclusion is that some soldiers must have been part of the "Καίσαρος οἰκίας" if the security of the imperial family was to be constantly monitored. It has been recorded, for example, that when during a meeting with a senator who had come to apologise for comments made in the Senate, Tiberias fell to the ground, the senator was nearly killed by the soldiers on duty, because they thought he had attacked the emperor.⁸⁸ It was also Tiberias, under the influence of the Praetorian Prefect, Sejanus, who brought the Guard into Rome and built new quarters for the unit,⁸⁹ an action which made the commanders of the Guards effective masters of the city.⁹⁰ While the vast majority of them would have been stationed in the city barracks, a detachment of trustworthy men would have been assigned specifically to the palace. When the peace-time activities of soldiers is considered, another intriguing possibility arises. While defence of the empire and emperor were the prime responsibilities of the army,

88 Brian Campbell, *The Roman Army, 31BC-AD339: A Sourcebook*. (New York / London: Routledge, 1994), 112.

89 Graham Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army of the First and Second Centuries*. 3rd ed. (London: A & C Black, 1998).

90 G. R. Watson, *The Roman Soldier*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 17.

McMullen's and Davies'⁹¹ studies show the wide variety of tasks performed by soldiers in all parts of the Empire. McMullen states that "soldiers did the jobs properly belonging to the civil service, and thus militarised government."⁹² He adds that "it can be said with something approaching certainty"⁹³ that the administrative and clerical staff of the highest government officials were drawn from the legions. Secretaries, accountants, scribes and paymasters would all come under this umbrella until the time of Diocletian, who, at the end of the 2nd century AD "is credited with separating military from civil office."⁹⁴ That members of the Praetorian Guard also had such skills is attested by inscriptions from the 2nd and 3rd centuries C.E.⁹⁵

CIL 3.2887=ILS 9067, with Breeze 1974, inscription, Corinium, Dalmatia, 2nd C.AD
(Sculpture of a soldier) To the spirits of the departed, in honour of Pletorius Primus, clerk of the treasury of the fourth praetorian cohort, century of Silvanus, from the province of Lower Pannonia, born at castle Vixillum, who lived thirty-five years, four months, served fifteen years, eight months. Veturia Digna set this up for her estimable husband.

CIL 6.2544=ILS 2066, inscription, Rome, 3rd C.AD Aulus Saufeius Emax, Son of Publius, of the tribe Camilia, from Ansium (?), soldier of the ninth praetorian cohort, century of Firmius Tertullus, served [---] years, clerk of [---] a tribune, officer of the watchword, o[rderly], decorated by

91 R. W. Davies, *The Daily Life of the Roman Soldier under the Principate*. *ANRW* II.1 (1974): 299-338.

92 R. McMullen, *Soldier and civilian in the Later Roman Empire*. (Harvard Historical Monographs LII.) (New York: Harvard University Press, 1963), 50.

93 McMullen, *Soldier & Civilian*, 68.

94 McMullen, *Soldier & Civilian*, 70.

95 Campbell, *Sourcebook*, 41.

Emperor [---] Caesar Augustus, with necklaces [---]

Campbell comments: “Among the praetorians there was the same range of specialist functions, clerkships, and other posts of limited responsibility as in the legions.”

From the necessity of having a military guard to the need for military and other official record keeping, a historical perspective would admit a probability of soldiers being members of Caesar’s household staff. This does not exclude the equally valid view that many of the household staff consisted of freedmen and slaves. When the residential establishment of the Emperor was the *de facto* government of the Empire and was the place where affairs of state were decided, Lightfoot’s opinion that it included “the meanest slave as well as the most powerful courtiers”⁹⁶ perhaps gives a truer image of the extent of the household. “In a military system such as that of the Empire, the soldiers and officers of the guard formed an important part of the household. That household, however, was an immense affair, including hundreds or even thousands of persons.”⁹⁷ Is it possible that Paul’s enthusiasm about the gospel penetrating the praetorian ranks was occasioned by his realization of this implication? Because of direct or indirect contact, potentially the gospel could enter the imperial household through the Praetorian guards and perhaps even reach the ears of the emperor.

Three other commentators are prepared to be more forthcoming about a link between the “πραιτωρι- and “Καίσαρος οἰκίας” but provide a range of opinion regarding conversions to Christianity. Hendriksen, for example, only hints at the possibility. While his images of soldiers listening “with a measure of disdain or hardly listened at all”,⁹⁸ progressing to being “deeply moved”, “deeply impressed”, “interested and then – enthusiastic”,⁹⁹ may be dismissed

96 J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistles of St. Paul: Philippians*. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1883), 171.

97 Robert Rainey, *The Epistle to the Philippians*. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1893), 47.

98 Wm. Hendriksen, *Philippians*. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1962), 69.

99 Hendriksen, *Philippians*, 69.

as contextual imagination, it is reasonable to suggest that soldiers would have talked about what they had heard and seen. If soldiers did reach the point of “interest” and “enthusiasm” then this tentatively suggests the potential of conversion. Hendriksen also comments that the news spread from the guards to Caesar’s household, thereby implying a close connection between the two. These statements perhaps require too much reading between the lines to reach a conclusion about conversion, but the impression that this is what Hendriksen has in mind comes through in the portrayal of progression from “disdain” to “enthusiasm” of the soldiers’ reaction to Paul and his message.

Baur asks the very pertinent question. “But how had Christianity gained access to the imperial house?”¹⁰⁰ Baur sees the Clement mentioned in 4:3 as a key figure but he gives equal weight to the influence of the Praetorian Guard.

Here, then, was a door through which, as soon as it had found belief in the Praetorium, Christianity might penetrate to the house of the emperor. Thus one circumstance fits into another in a perfectly natural way, and it is easy to account for the emphasis on the ‘advance of the gospel’ and the apostle’s imprisonment for Christ having become known ‘among all the Praetorium and all the rest’ at the very beginning of the Epistle. Two pieces of data are given: the Roman Clement, on the one hand, and the praefectus praetorio, on the other. What lies between the two – the interest of the whole Praetorium in Paul and Christianity, and the conversion of several members of the imperial house – follows as a natural consequence from these two pieces of data.¹⁰¹

100 F. C. Baur, *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ*. Vol.2 (London/Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1875), 59.

101 Baur, *Philippians*, 60.

Baur thus gives explicit expression to the link between the military and the household and includes conversion in that connection. Lightfoot is more ambiguous, but linking the soldiers with the palace in the context of “fruit” and “influence”, at the very least, implies that conversion did occur.

The praetorian soldiers, drafted off successively to guard him and constrained while on duty to bear him close company, had opportunities of learning his doctrine and observing his manner of life, which were certainly not without fruit. He had not been in Rome very long, before he could boast that his bonds were not merely known but known in Christ throughout the praetorian guard. In the palace of the Caesars too his influence was felt.¹⁰²

It is true that none of these commentators explicitly states that there were converts among the Praetorian guards, so the opinions of Thielman, Hendriksen, Baur and Lightfoot could merely be examples of ‘reading too much into the text’. However, of the eight epitaphs found inscribed on tombs of Christian soldiers in the pre-Constantine period, six were found in Rome.¹⁰³ Thus, regardless of how tenuous the connection, the possibility of Christians serving in the Praetorian Guard cannot be dismissed out of hand. Philippians 1:12-13 leaves no doubt about the impact on the unit. Indeed, to exclude the possibility of soldier converts in this situation is to deny the effectiveness of Paul’s ministry and witness during this two-year period. Since Paul does claim that the gospel had been advanced and made known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard, at the very

102 Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 19.

103 Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Towards War and Peace. A Historical and Critical Evaluation*. (London: Abingdon Press, 1960),69-70.

least a considerable number¹⁰⁴ of soldiers had been exposed to his message. Given Paul's reputation as a missionary, can it be stated categorically that no soldier was converted?

Karl Barth is one commentator who is not prepared to countenance an affirmative response to this question. He advises abiding by the simple translation and interpretation of verse 13, which indicates that "Paul's imprisonment has become in Rome a well-known and much talked-of affair."¹⁰⁵ When Paul's proven missionary effectiveness becomes part of this equation, possibility of conversion could easily become probability! Barth is prepared to endorse this view:

Paul's case has not remained in the sphere of an obscure lawsuit that concerns only those immediately involved. On the contrary, the fact of his imprisonment has become a *Word* that is at all events *noised abroad*, a *problem* which troubles the neighbourhood –and that not only the immediate neighbourhood – and stirs them up to think and question. And Paul will surely have had even more in mind than that: this Word has been heard, it has proved itself not only a problem, but a real power, it has met with not only interest but *faith*. It surely could not be otherwise...¹⁰⁶
(italics – the author's own)

Just over thirty years later, Rapske also sees the fading into insignificance of the legal basis for Paul's imprisonment. The freedom which he had been given to preach and teach was perhaps

104 Webster. *Roman Army*, 97. The legion at this time numbered approximately 6000 – inscriptions have been found bearing witness to the existence of cohort XII in the 40s C.E. and each cohort had 500 men. This was not increased until the 60s "when Vitellius in the panic of the Civil War enrolled 16 [cohorts] from legions loyal to himself."

105 Karl Barth. *The Epistle to the Philippians*. (London: SCM Press Ltd 1962), 26-27.

106 Barth. *Philippians*, 27-28.

the best testimony to the “significant and highly-placed Roman estimate of the trial’s probable outcome, i.e., that Paul will be released. Rapske’s findings lead him to see Paul’s relative freedom to preach as Roman tolerance generally, but more specifically to, “the official leniency of the soldier who guarded him.”¹⁰⁷ Winter’s research into Gallio’s ruling in the legal status of early Christianity (Acts 18: 14-15) leads him to conclude from the use of the word “unhindered” in other extant official documents that Festus had confirmed this ruling and that Paul had done nothing contrary to Roman law.¹⁰⁸

What Luke indicated was that although Paul was under the constant eye of a Roman guard, he was not in breach of Roman law by engaging in preaching and teaching. No charge of felony or political misdemeanour would be levelled against him on the basis of these activities in Rome.

This suggests none of those who guarded Paul regarded his conversations with overt hostility or suspicion. We cannot speculate on the range of opinions among those who guarded Paul, but, by his own maxim, if “faith comes by hearing....”¹⁰⁹ can we assert that all the apostle’s preaching and teaching fell on deaf ears? Meeks, from a sociological perspective, accepts that Paul was imprisoned in Rome and that he “clearly does believe ... that the witness of his imprisonment ‘in Christ’ (v13) has produced a favourable impression that creates the possibility of conversions among the personnel of the praetorium.”¹¹⁰ Anderson, a ‘pacifist’ writer, goes further than the commentators, with the exception of Barth, to explicitly claim:

107 Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*, 18.

108 B. W. Winter, “Gallio’s Ruling on the Legal Status of Early Christianity (Acts 18:14-15).” *Tyndale Bulletin* 50:2 (1999): 213-224, 224.

109 Romans 10:14.

110 Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 63.

“certainly soldiers were recruited into the Christian community”¹¹¹ citing Philippians 1:13 and 4:22.

Figure 4 would appear to suggest his assessment is correct for it indicates the presence of Christian soldiers in Rome at the end of the first and into the second century AD.¹¹² While not a flattering portrayal, the *graffito* indicates the presence of Christian soldiers at the Palatine in Rome, the seat of the imperial palace. It was discovered “behind a pillar in the Pedagogium on the Palatine during the 2nd century,”¹¹³ an edifice erected on the Palatine hill by Domitian for military and Olympic games training.¹¹⁴ It depicts a satirical perception of the Christian God, attributed to Tacitus by Tertullian, who was aware of it even by AD197. In the *Apology* he states: “For, like some others, you are under the delusion that our god is an ass’s head.”¹¹⁵

Fig. 4. Graffito found in the Pedagogium

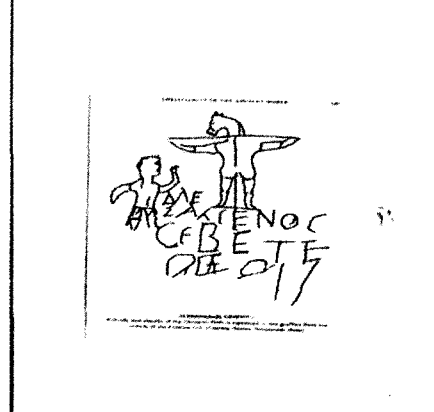


Illustration taken from *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* by Everett Ferguson.

¹¹¹ P. N. Anderson, “Jesus and Peace.” M. E. Miller & B. N. Gingerich, eds., *The Church’s Peace Witness*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 160.

¹¹² Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd. ed., (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 597.

¹¹³ www.gcocities.com/Christprisc/pagan-origins.html: No other details given. The site deals with the pagan origins of Christianity.

¹¹⁴ www.activitaly.it/inglese/monument/palatino.htm This is a tourist information site.

¹¹⁵ Tertullian, *Apology* 16, 52. A. Roberts & J. Donaldson, eds. “The Ante-Nicene Fathers.” Vol.3. *The Master Christian Library*: CD-ROM Version 8 (Rio, Wisconsin 53960: Ages Software Inc., 2000).

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If an impact was made on members of the Praetorian Guard, then the implication of this was particularly relevant to the Christian community at Philippi. The Acts account of the conversion of the Philippian jailer, who is generally believed to have been a soldier, is an indication of relevance. Bockmuehl¹¹⁶ expresses the consensus that “it remains entirely possible that Luke’s account reflects an authentic local tradition about the Philippian jailer as one of the city’s first converts.” Since evidence also shows that Philippi was one of the earliest veteran colonies and retained its military ethos, Geoffrion and Krentz regard the mention of ‘πραιτωρι-’ as significant for two reasons. Firstly, because it provides a direct connection between the locations of the writer and recipients of the letter. Geoffrion’s stated aim is to examine the political and military character of the letter to the Philippians, examining the “nuanced meaning and function” of Paul’s terminology “within the overall rhetorical argument.”¹¹⁷ For this purpose ancient literary sources have been used in the analysis of the linguistic and conceptual aspects of key words.¹¹⁸ His acceptance of the military ethos of the city can be demonstrated by the fact that it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that P. Mucius was *duovir* at Philippi at about the time of Paul’s visit there, the significance being that his tombstone inscription identifies him as a “centurion of the Legion VI Ferrata, *duovir* (i.e. joint mayor) with judicial powers at Philippi.”¹¹⁹

In his essay, Krentz puts the words mentioned by Geoffrion into their respective contexts in ancient writings, basing his conclusions on a

116 Marcus Bockmuehl, ‘Effective History’ of Philippians.” 16.

117 Timothy C. Geoffrion, *The Rhetorical Purpose and the Political and Military Character of Philippians: A Call to Stand Firm*. (New York: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 29.

118 For example:- σθηκετε – used as opposed to ‘flee’: φοβος – in the sense of being intimidated by an enemy: σωτηρια – used as opposed to ‘destruction: συναθικω (which occurs only in 1:27 and 4:3 in the NT). – contending together: πιστις – pledge: προπορευει – not found elsewhere in the Greek Bible – Used of battle by Diodorus of Sicily and by Plutarch: ἀτικειμενου – used in the sense of military adversaries in Exodus 23:22: ἔργων – battle. Pythagorus, Socrates, Aristotle, and Stoics. Epictetus and Seneca are cited., It was Seneca who said ‘vivere militare est’.

119 Saddington, “Military Personnel”, 2430.

much wider range of sources.¹²⁰ Specifically, he describes a Philippian coin depicting the goddess Victoria with the obverse showing “three military standards ringed by a beaded ‘milling’ with the legend COHOR(s) to the left and PRAE(toria) to the right.”¹²¹ Rapske agrees that “Philippi was the place that many Macedonians recruited into the Praetorian Guard....ended their days.”¹²² These claims are reinforced by an inscription from Rome in the 3rd century AD.¹²³ The language used on the coinage is also relevant, for Latin was the official language of the Roman army. Inscriptions and coins similar to those described remained in circulation with little alteration until the reign of Commodus, with their designation of Philippi as ‘*Colonia Augusta Julia Philippenis*’ remaining on the coinage “until at least the first half of the third century.”¹²⁴

Secondly, this link alone opens the possibility of further communication between serving and veteran soldiers and the latter’s families. If the claims made elsewhere are true, that Christianity reached Rome via “traders, businessmen or soldiers”,¹²⁵

120 E. M. Krentz, *Military Language and Metaphors in Philippians*. Essay in Origins & Method: Towards a New Understanding of Judaism & Christianity. (JSNT Supp. Series 86) (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993). Historians – Tacitus, Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Diodorus, Siculus, Appian, Arrian; Orators – Lysias, Aeschines, Demosthenes; Biographer – Plutarch; Philosophers – Socrates, Seneca, Epictetus, Hierocles (2nd century Stoic); Military Tactical Manuals – Aeneas, Tacitus, Asclepiodotus, Onosander, Polycienus; plus inscriptions.

121 Krentz, *Military Language*, 116-117.

122 Rapske, *Paul in Roman Custody*; 262.

123 Campbell, *Sourcebook*, 42. CIL6.2601=ILS2055. To the spirits of the departed, in honour of Aurelius Bitus, cavalryman of the sixth praetorian cohort, of Thracian nationality, citizen of Philippopolis, of more or less thirty-five years, who served seventeen years as follows: in Legion I Italica, two years, in the second praetorian cohort as an ordinary soldier, fourteen years; when promoted cavalry; Valerius Aulusanus, praetorian guardsman to his most worthy and matchless brother. Unfortunately there is no indication of whether Valerius was a brother by blood kin or a ‘brother-in-arms’. If the former, this inscription could be evidence for a family tradition of military service.

124 Krentz, *Military Language*, 112; Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 45. Philippian coins “show the same persistence of the Italian element: military motifs predominate and the city’s full Latin title persists until the reign of Gallienus.” Mikael Tellbe, *Paul between Synagogue and State. Christians, Jews, and Civic Authorities in 1 Thessalonians, Romans and Philippians*. (Coniectanea Biblica New Testament Series 34) (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 2001), 213. “In the middle of the first century CE, Philippi reflected clearly this Latin and military nature ... Latin seems to have taken over the role as the official language.”

125 Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, & Daniel G. Reid, eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. (Leicester: I.V.P., 1993), 83.

dissemination when a direct connection existed between the locations where members of the same military unit lived and settled cannot be discounted. Levick's assertion that "such towns...possess a strong military tradition, and there would be a tendency for sons to follow their father's profession"¹²⁶ indicated the continuation of a tradition "strengthened by a demonstrable use of Latin"¹²⁷ and it leads to the conclusion that the military ethos of the town was still discernible in Paul's day. Geoffrion appears to be in no doubt about this. He writes:

We cannot recover how many, if any of the Philippian Christians were actually descendants of the first military colonists, *but we can be sure they shared in the general ethos of the city.*¹²⁸ Paul's charge to live worthily of their political loyalties and his use of the military metaphor would have been understood by Greek and Roman alike, but especially appreciated by those in a city with a political and military heritage such as Colonia Augusta Julia Philippensis.¹²⁹

In the light of the 'praetorian' connection and the strength of Latin as the official language of the town, these rhetorical-linguistic studies

126 Barbara Levick, *Roman Colonies in Southern Asia Minor*. (London: O.U.P., 1967), 144.

Pliny, *Letter* 10:87, 291. Pliny writes to Trajan recommending the son of the centurion he brought out of retirement for promotion. "Nymphidius Lupus, an honest, hard-working young man, well worthy of his excellent father. He will prove equal to any mark of your favour, as you may judge from his first military appointment as commander of a cohort, for which he has won the highest praise ... Any promotion which you confer on my friend's son, Sir, will give me also an occasion for personal rejoicing."

127 Levick, *Roman Colonies*, 144. Levick, *Roman Colonies*, 161. She comments on the "astonishing vigour" of Latin. Krentz, *Military Language*, 112. Latin was not "superceded by Greek until the reign of Constantine." R. McMullen, *Soldier and civilian in the Later Roman Empire*, 96. "Soldiers also spread Latin, not only by making it the official army speech which all recruits must learn, no matter what their background, but also by simply living, marrying, buying, drinking and walking about a garrisoned area."

128 My italics.

129 Geoffrion, *Rhetorical Purpose of Philippians*, 38.

and that of Levick are very relevant to the topic in question. They make explicit what is only implicit in the commentaries. Indeed, there is an almost exultant tone in Philippians 1:12-13 that, at the very least, Paul, his cause and his gospel were a matter of gossip in military barracks and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The mention of “πραιτωρι- signals a breach in the ‘silence’ which has characterised early Christianity and military service, for it indicates the extent to which the Gospel became known to the military forces within Rome, its potential impact on ‘Caesar’s household’; and, because of its bond with Philippi, shows the potential for the extension of the gospel message through that one unit to families or communities with military connections. Admittedly much of the evidence to hand is circumstantial but, taken *in toto*, it is compelling enough to warrant circumspection before making any categorical denials of the possibility/probability of conversions among the Praetorian Guard in Rome or their military connections in Philippi.

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