

# **The Conversion of Cornelius, seen against the Political and Social Background of the Roman Empire**

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A Dissertation Submitted to the  
University of Birmingham  
For the Degree of Master of Philosophy

School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion  
College of Arts and Law  
The University of Birmingham  
November 2010

UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM

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## **ABSTRACT**

The basic framework of Roman policy towards the Jews and Judaism, initiated at the time of Julius Caesar, until before the time of Claudius, was quite permissive, allowing the Jews considerable religious freedom and privileges. There were of course occasional different applications of the policy depending on the Emperors or procurators in the regions.

Nonetheless, Judaism in the first half of the first century to some degree infiltrated into the Roman Empire and the range of the social status of the constituents was wide, from low class to high. There were considerable numbers of gentile adherents to Judaism and also of proselytes: among them were Roman adherents and proselytes and some of them were even members of the royal house.

The pragmatic policy of Rome towards the Jews and their religion, the wide range of Jewish infiltration into various classes of people, and in particular the numerous cases of conversion among the Romans do not exclude the possibility of the conversion of a Roman officer, despatched to the province in approximately AD 39, to a sect of the Jewish religion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the support of many people. I wish to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Philip Burton who offered invaluable assistance and excellent guidance with his abundant knowledge of New Testament history.

Thanks to my colleagues at the Postgraduate Study Room for furnishing an enjoyable study environment, for sharing the literature and for their invaluable assistance; especially to Rev. Seong-Gyu Lee and Rev. Kyu-Hyung Cho.

I wish to express my love and gratitude to my beloved wife and two daughters; for their support, understanding & endless love, through the duration of my studies.

Thanks to God who had given me such a great chance to study in the University of Birmingham. With His guidance I was able to reach a broader understanding of the historical background of the Acts. I hope this will be helpful for my future ministry. May God be glorified!

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Was the conversion of a Roman officer to the religion of one of Rome's subject nations in the mid-first century legally permitted in the political and social context of the time? If it was not permitted, was tacit toleration applied in such cases of conversion? What about the historical reliability of the Cornelius narrative in Acts 10-11? Was the narrative Luke's invention for a certain purpose?

The aim of the present research is to reconstruct the political and social context of the Roman Empire mainly in the first half of the first century, carrying out an in-depth study of the context at this time, so as to show whether the conversion of Cornelius, a Roman centurion – though, as A.N. Sherwin-White points out “not necessarily a Roman citizen,”<sup>1</sup> – was possible or not in the circumstances.

Before proceeding with the historical survey of the context, it seems useful to discuss the historical authenticity of Acts, in particular that of the Cornelius incident, and then to examine the term, “God-fearing,” as used in this narrative, because debates about the authenticity of Acts and about whether or not such a group of people existed in the first century<sup>2</sup> have arisen.

An investigation into the policies of the world powers concerning the Jews and Judaism is the next step, for it is judged that their policy of them all was to some extent similar to that of the Roman Empire and is an extension of that of Rome; hence then the policy of Rome, the scope of its implementation and the strictness of its enforcement should all be examined.

Further, an investigation of the records of the ancient historians which elaborates on details of the conversion of gentiles and Romans to the Jewish religions, along

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<sup>1</sup> A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Law and Roman Society in the New Testament* (1992), 160.

<sup>2</sup> A.T. Kraabel, “The Disappearance of the ‘God-fearers,’” *Numen* 28, (1981), 113-26.

with the information aforementioned, would let us approach the question of whether a Roman officer in the mid-first century could adopt the religion of one of Rome's subject nations.

## CHAPTER 2 THE HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY OF ACTS

### 2.1 Introduction

The Christian faith, as H. Marshall observes, is based on the belief that the Scriptural accounts are historical facts.<sup>3</sup> The life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which the authors of other Gospels as well as Luke transmit as historical facts, are the basis of Christian faith.<sup>4</sup>

Given E.H. Carr's mention that "no document can tell us more than what the author of the document thought,"<sup>5</sup> the written history cannot help but be subjective at least to some extent. History is always an interpretation and not simply a description of past events.

Accordingly, it can be said that the observer's point of view must have been included in the book of Acts which contains a historical account. In Acts, there are numerous records of supernatural phenomenon, occurred in the process of the spread of the gospel and this is one of the reasons for some to conclude that Acts are historically unreliable, something like an ancient adventure story.<sup>6</sup> This question has attracted considerable interest, especially since the publication of Pervo's 'Profit with Delight' in 1987.

Then can we accept it as a historically reliable account of facts? Here, the question about the historical reliability of Acts is significant, for included in the books are not only the far-reaching propagation activities of the eyewitnesses who had seen the resurrected Jesus and the dissemination of the primitive Christian faith, but also the Cornelius narrative which is the starting point of this research.

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<sup>3</sup> H. Marshall, *Luke, Historian and Theologian*, (1984), 34.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>5</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is history?*, (1961), 10.

<sup>6</sup> R.I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles*, (1987), especially 37-45.

It is, of course, almost impossible to prove or disprove the historical reliability of Acts. The purpose of this research is not to trace the historicity of the Cornelius incident itself, but to investigate whether such case of a Roman officer's conversion as that of Cornelius was possible in the context of this epoch.

Therefore, what it is dealt with in this chapter, since the subject of the historical reliability of Acts is too broad to consider here, is to briefly mention the main contentions which scholars have disputed and the conclusions they have come to, and an evaluation of the writer.

Two currents of biblical scholarship from the mid-nineteenth century had been in conflict: one from the "Tübingen School" and the other from the Christian orthodoxy, which emerged in reaction to the former.<sup>7</sup> Centering on these two scholarly traditions, their controversy over the historical reliability of Acts and the surrounding issues will be considered.

## **2.2 Two Currents of Thought on the Historical Authenticity of Acts**

### **2.2.1 A Challenge to the Historical Authenticity of Acts**

For many scholars, the record of Acts, as well as of the Gospels, is approached less as a reliable report of the historical facts and more as theological framework.<sup>8</sup> Under the influence of the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a certain skepticism on the historical aspects of Christian faith appeared and objections were made against conventional belief in the historical reliability of both the Acts and the Gospels by the "Tübingen school" in 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. This school raised

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<sup>7</sup> W.W. Gasque, "Roots of Contemporary New Testament Criticism," in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation*, edit. W.W. Gasque & W. S. Lasor, (1987), 149.

<sup>8</sup> J.B. Tyson, "The gentile mission and the Authority of Scripture in Acts," *NTS* 33, (1987), 619-31; J. J. Scott, JR, "The Cornelius Incident in the Light of its Jewish Setting," *JETS* 34, (1991), 475-84; E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Commentary*, (1971), 357.

questions on the historical reliability of the record of Acts, on the grounds that there was a considerable time-lag between the historical facts and the written records of them in this part of the New Testament. This was one of the primary reasons which led them to conclude that Acts is historically unreliable.

However, it seems that this cannot be a valid reason for the rejection of the historicity of Acts, though considering that the longer time-lag, the less possibility for the accuracy of the record is.

For E. Haenchen, a scholar of the “Tübingen School,” Acts is a theological composition and not a record of historical facts, and it consists mostly of Luke’s own preaching rather than that of the apostles.<sup>9</sup> He argues that the strange and abstruse problems found in Acts can be solved only when it is seen from the standpoint of its theological meaning, setting “aside all questions of historical authenticity or sources.”<sup>10</sup> It seems that he concludes that what is not understood is not the historical fact. But there are numerous historical events that are not understood occurring in reality.

His commentary explicitly indicates the anti-supernaturalistic view of Scripture and has its roots in the work of F.C. Baur (1792-1860) and the “Tübingen School” which contributed greatly to the development of a historical-critical approach to the Scripture which saw the possibility of divine influence as outside its remit.

Baur, an ardent disciple of Hegel and much influenced by his idealistic philosophy, attempted to explain all the events in the Scripture by a combination of political, social and cultural motives; he applied Hegelian dialectic to the New Testament, but failed to consider its divine elements.

For M. Dibelius, noted, like Rudolf Bultmann, for skepticism toward any possibility of describing the historical Jesus, the reason for the factual inconsistencies in Acts was that Luke not only combined early sources but invented

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<sup>9</sup> W.W. Gasque, “Roots of Contemporary New Testament Criticism,” in *Scripture, Tradition and Interpretation*, edit. W.W. Gasque & W.S. Lasor, (1987), 147.

<sup>10</sup> E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: a Commentary*, (1971), 357.

a legend about the incidental conversion of a God-fearer, in order to establish the principle which would justify the mission to the gentiles.<sup>11</sup> For the scholars who follow such views as those of the Tübingen school, comparatively few of the records of Acts are historically reliable.

The Tübingen school and its disciples in their critical investigation of miracles recorded in the Scripture used natural law as the criterion to winnow out truth from falsehood. In other words, the birth and the resurrection of Jesus are false, because they are contrary to natural law.

My focus in this dissertation is more restricted. In the first place, we are not concerned with the historicity of the New Testament or even Acts as a whole, but simply with one incident in Acts. In the second place, we are not concerned to separate historical truth from legend or invention, but rather with the theological significance of the story for Luke. Indeed, the two are largely inseparable.

### **2.2.2 The Christian-orthodox Current**

The other half is the British New Testament scholarship. This current reasserted orthodoxy against the historical critical current of the Tübingen School and stands on the side which concedes the historical authenticity of Acts.

J.B. Lightfoot (1828 - 1889), one of the representatives of British New Testament scholarship, drastically attacked the Tübingen view, through his numerous commentaries on the letters of Paul and on the Apostolic Fathers, by calling their reconstruction of the records of the New Testament only a “castle built in the sky, without any foundation in historical research.”<sup>12</sup> Through the work of

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<sup>11</sup> M. Dibelius, “The Conversion of Cornelius,” in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, edit. H. Greeven, (1956), 109-122.

<sup>12</sup> Gasque, ‘Roots of Contemporary New Testament Criticism,’ 153.

Lightfoot, the Tübingen view did not gain a dominant position in British biblical scholarship.<sup>13</sup>

As a matter of fact, the Christian-orthodox current may be exemplified by F.F. Bruce (1910 - 1990), one of the founders of the modern evangelical understanding of the Scripture, whose roots are in British New Testament scholarship. The two currents, the Tübingen School and the Christian-orthodox current, in contemporary biblical scholarship with respect to Acts are found in the commentaries of Bruce and Haenchen.<sup>14</sup>

Bruce's commentaries on Acts reach entirely opposite conclusions to Haenchen's on a considerable number of points in particular on the matter of the historical reliability of the book. He points out that the reliability of Acts in its historicity and in especially its geography had been attested by the research of the late Sir William Ramsay<sup>15</sup> and "one of the most impressive examples of Luke's accuracy is in the titles of the various officials in the Empire ... titles of provincial governors changed suddenly at times if the status of provinces was changed."<sup>16</sup> Bruce claims that Luke wrote in the strict traditions of Greek historiography and his two books, Luke and Acts, are two parts of one continuous historical record, allowing the diversity of the outstanding sources and the personal appearances in some of them.<sup>17</sup>

One of the reasons to assume that the reports of eyewitnesses in Luke and Acts were based on historical facts and not the author's invention of the words and deeds of Jesus is that many of His disciples were still alive at the time when Luke and Acts were written and it would not have been difficult for them to remember whether the author's testimonies had occurred virtually or in fact. Moreover the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles*, (1975), 11.

<sup>15</sup> See. W.M. Ramsay, *Pauline and other studies in early Christian history*, (1906), 199.

<sup>16</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (1956), 17.

<sup>17</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: are They Reliable?* (1960), 80-81.

disciples would not have been able to risk the addition of unhistorical statements or the perversion of facts, for it could have supplied a reason for attacking their religion, by which the entire testimonies of the disciples could have been discredited.<sup>18</sup>

Bruce points out that the Tübingen conclusions on the historical reliability of the books of Luke was the result of philosophical presupposition, but not of historical evidence,<sup>19</sup> and also mentions that “to reject the supernatural out of hand just because it is supernatural, without considering the circumstances or the evidence, is as unscientific as to accept it uncritically”<sup>20</sup>.

There are still numerous recent scholars or commentators, who, though they may recognize that Luke included a theological and editorial intention in his books, consider the unity to the narrative as a whole and the appropriateness of its content to the situation as reasons for accepting the historical reliability of the books.<sup>21</sup>

### **2.3 Conclusion**

The question of the historical reliability of Acts has been one of the most controversial issues, but neither of the two currents considered above seems to possess crucial evidence in its support and it is difficult to conclude in favour of either.

Despite the split in theological views, it seems possible to take the approach of historical criticism to the Cornelius narrative, which is believed to have been set in the early stages of the spread of Christianity; it will advance the discussion on whether the Cornelius incident could have taken place or not, for this discussion

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 14-15.

<sup>20</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (1956), 17.

<sup>21</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, rev. & edit. Grand Rapids, (1988), 201; I.H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: an Introduction and Commentary*, (1980), 180-83; C.S.C. Williams, *A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, (1957), 170-71.

takes in different approaches, such as considering the Roman attitude to Roman converts.

## CHAPTER 3 DID GOD-FEARERS EXIST?

### 3.1 Introduction

Preceding the question of Cornelius' conversion, the claim that he was a God-fearer with the status of a Roman has been a controversial issue among scholars, because of the vagueness of the term 'God-fearer' and the variety of meanings given to it. Historically, 'God-fearer' has been interpreted as meaning something different from a full convert to Judaism.<sup>22</sup> By what criterion was the distinction between them made? Was there, historically speaking, a category of people called 'God-fearers'? Did the term, 'God-fearer,' as traditionally believed, indicate the Gentiles who sympathized with Judaism?

The traditional view of the category of people indicated by 'God-fearer', the arguments against the traditional view and other views in relation to it will be investigated in this chapter. Further, the chapter will address the criterion by which people in antiquity distinguished between God-fearers and Proselytes and the sources which show whether such groups of people existed.

### 3.2 Controversy over God-fearers

God-fearers have traditionally been defined as people in the non-Jewish community who are interested in Jewish morality and the God of the Jews and affiliate themselves in some degree to Judaism. This traditional image of God-fearers is derived to a marked degree from the portrait of Luke in Acts.<sup>23</sup> Do God-fearers, as these traditional beliefs state, designate people who had some affection for the Jewish God, but who were not full proselytes?

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<sup>22</sup> J. Reynolds & R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias*, (1987), 50.

<sup>23</sup> Acts: 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26, 13:43, 50; 16:14; 17:4, 17; 18:7.

In 1933, Kirsopp Lake raised the question whether the term, ‘God-fearer,’ designated a category of gentiles who were located midway between paganism and Judaism.<sup>24</sup> After about twenty years, Louis H. Feldman demonstrated that the terms were widely used in the first century to indicate people who were “pious” or “religious”, regardless of whether they were Jews or gentiles.<sup>25</sup>

A.T. Kraabel in 1981 raised a further question on the existence of God-fearers, claiming that there was no convincing evidence for the existence of such people.<sup>26</sup> The traditional view of God-fearers was mainly based on Luke’s presentation in Acts, but the people depicted there as God-fearers, he argued, were nothing more than Luke’s invention. The terms, *φοβούμενος* and *σεβόμενος*, which Luke used to describe such gentiles never appear in the excavated synagogue inscriptions investigated by Kraabel: only the term, *θεοσεβής*, appears in them; it occurs ten times, always describing Jews.<sup>27</sup> This to him means that the inscriptions suggest no evidence for the existence of such a group of Gentiles around the synagogues at the time of the Diaspora and bear no trace of the Jews’ religious reaching out to gentiles in this way. Accordingly, the traditional belief about God-fearers, he claims, is not credible and Luke’s narrative has no authenticity.

Since Kraabel’s discussion of these questions in his article, ‘The Disappearance of the God-fearers,’ numerous articles have followed, with similar concerns.<sup>28</sup> Louis Robert, an authority of modern epigraphy, takes quite a similar stand to Kraabel’s, claiming in sum that the term, *θεοσεβής*, cannot possibly designate a

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<sup>24</sup> K. Lake, “Proselytes and God-fearers,” in F. F. Jackson & K. Lake, *The Beginnings of Christianity: the Acts of the Apostles* Vol. 5, (1933), 88.

<sup>25</sup> L.H. Feldman, “Jewish ‘Sympathizers’ in Classical Literature and Inscriptions,” *TPAPA* 81, (1950), 200-08.

<sup>26</sup> A.T. Kraabel, “The Disappearance of the ‘God-fearers,’” *Numen* 28, (1981), 113-24.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>28</sup> M. Wilcox, “The ‘God-fearers’ in Acts: A Reconsideration,” *JSNT* 13, (1981), 102-22; T.M. Finn, “The God-fearers Reconsidered,” *CBQ* 47, (1985), 75-84; A.T. Kraabel, “Greeks, Jews, and Lutherans in the Middle Half of Acts,” in *Christians among Jews and gentiles*, edit. G. Nickelsburg & G. MacRae, (1986); J.G. Gager, “Jews, gentiles, and Synagogues in the Book of Acts,” *THTR* 79, (1986), 91-9; J.A. Overman, “The God-fearers: some neglected Features,” *JSNT* 32, (1988), 17-26.

pagan Judaizer, and can be used only to indicate the devotion of a member of the community.<sup>29</sup> However he simultaneously mentioned that “no evidence from the inscriptions themselves is to justify the claim that they must all refer to Jews.”<sup>30</sup>

More recently, in 1981, Wilcox, in support of Lake’s conclusion that the terms οὐ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, in Acts designate the pious in the Jewish community without distinction between gentile adherents, proselytes and Jews,<sup>31</sup> argued that no clues on the question of whether the two groups which Paul mentions in Acts 13:16, οἱ ἄνδρες Ἰσραηλῆται καὶ οὐ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεόν, mean two different groups could be obtained from these verses,<sup>32</sup> and that it was impossible to judge ethnicity either from the name, *Iustus*, in Acts 18:7 or from the verse.<sup>33</sup>

In 1985, T. M. Finn, in his article, “The God-fearers Reconsidered,” questioned some of Kraabel’s conclusions: the term, *θεοσεβής*, which occurs in newly excavated inscriptions in an Aphrodisias synagogue, designates people who are positively distinct from both proselytes and Jews.<sup>34</sup> Further, he presents more materials which suggest that people called God-fearers did indeed exist: one of them appears in the fourteenth satire of Juvenal, in which a Roman father worships the Jewish God on the Sabbath and is in consequence called “Sabbath-fearer.” He observes the Jewish dietary laws and his son not only becomes a proselyte, but even abandons Roman law to learn Mosaic Law.<sup>35</sup> Substantially, satire is assumed to satirise something that actually exists, though Juvenal was active in the late first and the early second century.

This reasoning is corroborated by Josephus and Philo. Though questions about the historical reliability of the records of Josephus are asked, as they are widely

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<sup>29</sup> Cited by Gager, “Jews, Gentiles, and Synagogues in the Book of Acts,” *THTR* 96: L. Robert, *Nouvelles Inscriptions de Sardes*, (1964), 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> M. Wilcox, “The ‘God-fearers’ in Acts - a Reconsideration,” 102-22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

<sup>34</sup> T.M. Finn, “The God-fearers Reconsidered,” 75-84.

<sup>35</sup> Juvenal, *The Sixteen Satires*, (edit. & intro. Peter Green; 1967), 266.

accepted as apologetic history, being eager to exaggerate the impact of Jewish religion on pagans, recent investigation and even skeptical scholars consent that “the formal features of his documents are correct for genre and period and that it is difficult to conceive of them as forgeries.”<sup>36</sup> Granted Josephus’s apologetic concerns, and granted the fact he might be broadly reliable yet misleading on this point, the burden of proof is none the less those who would question his account.

Josephus describes the conversion of the royal family of Adiabene in the mid-first century. Ananias, a Jewish merchant, persuaded the wives of the king of Characene ‘to respect God after the manner of the Jews’ (τὸν θεὸν σέβειν ὡς Ἰουδαίοις πάτριον ἦν), □ and Izates, the prince of Adiabene, persuaded by them, recognized that his mother, Helena, had already been instructed by another Jewish merchant when he returned home.<sup>37</sup> Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum made a diagnosis that “τὸν θεὸν σέβειν was not the same as to adopt the Jewish Law, but some lesser commitment.”<sup>38</sup>

Not only that, Josephus’s document about the God-fearers is that they are confirmed by the writings of Philo. Josephus says that numerous Greeks who looked kindly on Jewish practices were living in both Europe and Asia.<sup>39</sup>

Philo confirms the existence of such sympathizers, who inclined to Jewish beliefs and practices, excluding circumcision, by reproaching them for favouring only “ethical” circumcision.<sup>40</sup> He also mentions, in describing the annual Jewish festival held on the island of Pharos at Alexandria, that not only Jews, but *πομπληθεὶς* □ *ἕτεροι* (a multitude of others) always attend, who must be gentiles, presumably those who have in some degree affection to Judaism.

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<sup>36</sup> T. Rajak, “Was there a Roman Charter for the Jews?” *TJRS* 74, (1984), 109.

<sup>37</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XX, 34-5.

<sup>38</sup> J. Reynolds & R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias*, (1987), 50.

<sup>39</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion*, 162-67; 281-84.

<sup>40</sup> Cited by T.M. Finn, “The God-fearers Reconsidered,” 83: *De mig. Abr.* 89.

In the year following that in which Finn questioned Kraabel's conclusions, 1986, Gager also argued against the views of Kraabel and Robert, insisting that no evidence from inscriptions justifies supposing that the term must designate all Jews and asserting that their reasoning was absurd and rested on unwarranted assumptions.<sup>41</sup>

Gager, investigating inscriptions which present numerous examples of the existence of people who chose to affiliate themselves with Judaism or synagogue without full conversion, also suggests, as Finn mentions, a set of inscriptions from ancient Aphrodisias synagogues in Caria, now part of western Turkey, as new evidence to show that *θεοσεβής* designates people who are distinct from both proselytes and other Jews: the listed names in the first text among the two contain "a mix of Jewish (*Eusabbathios*), biblical (*Ioseph*), and common Greek and Roman types, while following the break there are no biblical or Jewish names" and those in the second text are a "mixture of Jewish, biblical, and Greco-Roman types. Several of the biblical names, for example, Samouel, are identified as proselytes; two of the Greco-Roman names are identified as *θεοσεβής*."<sup>42</sup>

Gager admits, of course, that "this does not prove that every reference to a *θεοσεβής* designates a gentile sympathizer."<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the possibility is at least significantly increased that the term was broadly taken in epigraphy to indicate such gentile sympathizers and they performed an officially important role in the synagogues.

Reynolds and Tannenbaum mentions as below:

In the first place *Φοβούμενοι/σεβούμενοι τὸν κύριον/τὸν θεόν* is the Septuagint's version of Hebrew יראי יהוה or יראי אל (*Yirei Adonai, Yirei' El*), those who fear the Lord (or) God, in a

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<sup>41</sup> Gager, "Jews, Gentiles, and Synagogues in the Book of Acts," 96.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 98.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*.

number of passages in the Psalms. θεοσεβης is the Septuagint's version of Hebrew ירא אלהים (*yere' Elohim*), one who fears God, in several other passages of the OT. Therefore it seems reasonable to suggest that all the Greek words used for God-fearers in the early Christian era were intended to mean the same as the (almost interchangeable) Hebrew biblical terms, which are also the direct source for the Talmudic *yirei shamayim* (where 'God' has become 'Heaven' according to the usual metonymy). This would suggest, but not prove, that all these terms are synonymous.<sup>44</sup>

There is another piece of evidence from a Diaspora synagogue of a gentile sympathizer with Judaism, this time a woman: an inscription in a synagogue in Akmonia tells that certain Jewish officials had helped to restore it. However, the main benefactor was in another inscription in Akmonia later identified not as a Jewess but as the priestess of a pagan god.<sup>45</sup>

### **3.3 God-fearers and proselytes**

As mentioned above, the existence of God-fearers in the first century seems undeniable and now in this chapter, the features of God-fearers and proselytes and the difference between them, though S.J.D. Cohen argued that Josephus knew three types of Gentiles: righteous, adherents and converts,<sup>46</sup> will be discussed. God-fearers are conventionally distinguished from the proselytes, meaning the converts to Judaism. Proselytes were accepted into the Jewish community, according to Rowley, with at least three demands imposed on them: circumcision, Sabbath observance and an

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<sup>44</sup> J. Reynolds & R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias*, (1987), 49.

<sup>45</sup> Cited by P.F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: the Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*, (1987); B. Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives*, No. 33, (1967), 34-6.

<sup>46</sup> S.J.D. Cohen, "Respect for Judaism by Gentiles according to Josephus," *HTR*, 80:4, (1987), 427.

offering to the Sanctuary.<sup>47</sup> Only the second and third conditions were imposed on women.

In the Satires of Juvenal, conversion entails the denial of the pagan gods and obedience to the Jewish laws.<sup>48</sup> Tacitus mentions that the Jews “instituted the circumcision of the genitalia in order to be recognizable by their difference. Those who cross over into their manner of life adopt the same practice, and, before anything else, are instructed to despise the gods, disown their native land, and regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account.”<sup>49</sup> We should not of course necessarily assume that the proselytes in one region were treated identically to those in other regions, because the range of demands for the converts to conform to the Jewish law could differ, depending on the communities in different regions.

However, God-fearers, as traditionally accepted, were not under an obligation to observe all the Jewish Law, as the ‘proselytes’ were, but only some clauses of it. God-fearers in the rabbinic writings were regarded in the same light as those called ‘proselytes of the gate’,<sup>50</sup> but the genuine proselytes were called ‘proselytes of righteousness.’<sup>51</sup> However, God-fearers, Schurer explains, have nothing to do with the ‘proselytes of the gate’, and a ‘righteous man’, i.e., a foreigner observing the Law, grew later to mean a foreigner living ‘within the gates’ or in the Land of Israel (Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14; 14:21, 24:14).”<sup>52</sup> They attended the Jewish synagogues, but needed to observe only certain clauses of the Law, the most basic of the ritual

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<sup>47</sup> H.H. Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran: studies in the Old Testament*, (1963), 211; see Gal. 5:3.

<sup>48</sup> E. Courtney, *A Commentary on the Satires of Juvenal 14*, (1980), 96-106.

<sup>49</sup> Tacitus, *The histories of Tacitus*, intro. & no. A.D. Godley, (1890), 5.5.2.

<sup>50</sup> J. Reynolds & R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias*, (1987), 48; E. Schurer, *The History of the People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, (1986), 171-2

<sup>51</sup> E. Schurer, *The History of the People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, (1986), 171-2.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

commandments. Some were involved in prayers and Scripture lessons, some attended the synagogue services and some observed the Sabbath and the dietary laws on occasion, but they were not considered full proselytes and so were not held to belong to the main body of each Jewish community.

Gentiles through association with Jews might have observed Judaism and had some affection for it; on occasion they may have become proselytes. Such people, who were judaised without conversion, existed as a defined group from the first century on.<sup>53</sup> In antiquity, events of conversion from and into Judaism between the Jews and the gentiles were also not uncommon.<sup>54</sup> Rowley goes on to say that both groups, God-fearers and proselytes, were quite numerous but most of them decided to be God-fearers rather than proselytes, since a full proselyte had to be circumcised and strict observation of the laws was demanded.<sup>55</sup>

In a series of passages, Josephus boasts that numerous gentiles throughout the world, from ancient times to their own, have adopted Jewish practices and displayed a devotion to Judaism. Josephus adds, with obvious exaggeration, “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 fasts and the lighting of lamps and many of our prohibitions in the matter of food are not observed.”<sup>56</sup> While many who practiced this observance may neither have known nor cared about its Jewish roots, undoubtedly many will have done so (as for instance Juvenal did). In addition, some Greeks who went up to worship at the Feast in John 12:20 must be included in

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

<sup>54</sup> S.J.D. Cohen, “Crossing the Boundary and Becoming a Jew,” *HTR* 82.1, (1989), 13.

<sup>55</sup> H.H. Rowley, *From Moses to Qumran: Studies in the Old Testament*, (1963), 215-6.

<sup>56</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion*, 1.22, 162-67 & 2.39, 281-84; compare Philo, *Life of Moses*, 2.4, 17-24.

the group of people called God-fearers. One can see these to some extent as reflecting the influence of Judaism in the first century.

### **3.4 Summary and Conclusion**

Questions on ‘God-fearers’, in particular on the definition of those called ‘God-fearers,’ and on whether such people ever historically existed, have been investigated by numerous scholars. In particular, the questions raised by Kraabel on the historical existence of this group shook conventional opinion.

However, numerous historical clues from documents by satirists and ancient writers, such as Josephus and Philo, as well as Luke, in spite of some archaeological vagueness, seem to endorse the existence of such gentiles in the first century. The investigation by Gager, Reynolds and Tannenbaum of a set of inscriptions from ancient Aphrodisias synagogues presents much evidence for the possibility that a group of people of this kind existed, distinct from both proselytes and Jews.

The criterion for differentiating between God-fearers and proselytes was never uniform but slightly different depending on time and place. While there was no compulsion for the God-fearers to observe the Mosaic Law, generally three basic demands, i.e., circumcision, observing the Sabbath day and an offering to the Sanctuary, were required from the proselytes.

## CHAPTER 4 THE CONVERSION OF A ROMAN CENTURION

### 4.1 Introduction

The conversion story of a Roman centurion, Cornelius, in Acts, seems strange not only because the period of the event is widely agreed to have been that of Gaius, who was harsh to the Jews and Judaism, but also because it is known that the Imperial cult was demanded of all Roman soldiers at this time.<sup>57</sup>

In these circumstances, that the imperial cult included the fealty of soldiers and had even more religious meaning, was it possible for a centurion to have been a worshipper of other gods? The Roman state might have seen this as a want of loyalty to the emperor.

Do the images of centurions written in the Scripture well reflect the general images of them conceived by the general population of the time? If not, what account for the discrepancy?

This chapter discusses the general role of centurions in the first century, the gap in perceptions between the general and scriptural images, and the reason for it, which is related to the dialectical purpose of the author of Acts.

### 4.2 The Status and the Role of Centurions

Under the terms of a group of military reforms by Gaius Marius, a general of the Roman republic, in 107 BC, a centurion was always a professional officer of the Roman army. The Roman army was at the heart of Roman power and the most pivotal role in the Roman army was that of the centurions, for they were responsible for maintaining discipline in their units. They supervised the fighting on the field and

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<sup>57</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XV*, 17-57.

managed to make sure that its power in peacetime was exercised as Rome wanted it to be. The reason for saying that the centurions played a pivotal role, though there were higher echelons in the hierarchy of the Roman army such as proconsuls or commanders of legions (*legatus*), is that the experience and management of centurions surpassed those of a proconsul or commander of a legion. The two latter posts could be attained without any military experience.<sup>58</sup> This caused people to raise questions on the military ability of commanders of the Roman army and, as a matter of fact, numerous historical sources discussed these questions as well: some books give a negative image of the ability of commanders of legions, saying that they were almost amateur soldiers and short of practice and experience.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the commanders of legions depended heavily on the advice of the '*primus pilus centurio*' or '*praefectus castrorum*'.<sup>60</sup> H.M.D. Parker elaborated that it was due to the executive ability of the centurions that the Roman state was able to expand into an Empire, in spite of the unskilled command of its Army commanders.<sup>61</sup> What this passage makes clear is that the most practical and substantial role was taken by the centurions.

The way to promotion was open to all centurions so that any of them who proved to be suitable could even attain the post of *primuspilus*, the highest ranking centurion in the legion.<sup>62</sup> The income of the centurions was quite good: for an ordinary centurion, in the reign of Augustus, it was five times the pay of a Praetorian

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<sup>58</sup> G.H. Stevenson, *The Army and Navy*, in *Cambridge Ancient History X*, (1934), 226.

<sup>59</sup> M. Grant, *The Army of the Caesars*, (1974), 64.

<sup>60</sup> N. Rodgers, *The Roman Army: Legions, Wars and Campaigns*, (2000), 23.

<sup>61</sup> H.M.D. Parker, *The Roman Legions*, (1928), 186-187, 193.

<sup>62</sup> J.B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army; 31BC - AD235*, (1984), 102.

Guardsmen and the *primuspilus* received twenty times this amount.<sup>63</sup> Such high pay and emoluments seem to reflect the responsibilities and importance of the post.

Moreover, the centurions also played a judicial role, appointed by the praetors. When cases concerned soldiers in camp, the centurion could make a decision, unless the cases were particularly important. The earliest known example is found in a papyrus of AD 31, in which a fisherman petitions a centurion that a soldier and his companions, several civilians, were guilty of stealing fish from his pond and requests that the perpetrators make recompense for what they had taken: another petitioner in AD 37 who was robbed of some of his possessions by shepherds asks a centurion to get back his private property and to obtain justice for him.<sup>64</sup> Davies introduces numerous cases of juridical roles for centurions in Roman Egypt and Syria.<sup>65</sup>

Commanders carrying out the most pivotal role in the army, judges in the minor infringements occurring within camps and peacekeepers in the area to which they were assigned were the general roles of centurions.

### **4.3 Tyrannical Centurions vs. Compassionate Centurions**

The images of centurions found in the Scripture are mostly compassionate and amicable. This does not seem to reflect the general images of them. Luke makes mention neither of any involvement of Cornelius in the imperial cult nor of his

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<sup>63</sup> A. Dobson, 'The Significance of the Centurion and "Primipilaris" in the Roman Army and Administration,' *ANRW* II.1, (1974), 408.

<sup>64</sup> Cited by Campbell, *The Emperor and Roman Army*, (1984), 102; S. Daris, *Documenti per la Storia dell'Esercito Romano in Egitto*, (1964), 156.

<sup>65</sup> R.W. Davies, *Service in the Roman Army*, edit. D. Breeze & V.A. Maxfield, (1989), 175-85; N. Pollard, *Soldiers, Cities, and Civilians in Roman Syria*, (2000), 91-96.

forcing it on the Jews; he does not depict him as rapacious, but rather as a devout God-fearer whose generosity is exemplary.<sup>66</sup>

There are four centurions for whom the Scripture gives comparatively detailed descriptions: three of them, including Cornelius, are depicted as quite friendly to the Jews and the last centurion who took the Apostle Paul to Rome appears as more or less neutral on the Jews and their religion.

The first centurion appears as a compassionate person in Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:2-10.

When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a centurion came to him, asking for help. "Lord," he said, "my servant lies at home paralyzed and in terrible suffering." Jesus said to him, "I will go and heal him." The centurion replied, "Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Then Jesus said to the centurion, "Go! It will be done just as you believed it would." And his servant was healed at that very hour. <Matt.8:5-13 – NIV>

There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, "This man deserves to have you do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them. He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: "Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go,' and he goes; and that one, 'Come,' and he comes. I say to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it." When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well. <Lk.7:2-10 - NIV>

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<sup>66</sup> P.F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, (1987), 93-97.

A centurion, having heard of Jesus' reputation, came to Jesus and asked His help for the centurion's sick servant and as a result the servant recovered. The centurion, because of the faith he had shown, was praised by Jesus for a level of faith above any person Jesus had ever found in Israel.

Although there are considerable differences in the story, the fair agreement of the content of the conversation between Jesus and the centurion: while Matthew states that "a centurion came to him" (Mt.8:5), in Luke the centurion sends delegations to Jesus rather than having direct contact with him (Lk.7:3). Yet, I am not going to discuss about whether which material between the two is more original<sup>67</sup> or about the two passages' relationship to the Q material as some believe,<sup>68</sup> for what it is concerned in the two passages here is about the noteworthy demeanour of the centurion who had shown praiseworthy faith.

The second centurion is of at the foot of the cross in Matthew 27:54, Mark 15:37-39 and Luke 23:47;

When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, "Surely he was the Son of God!" <Matt.27:54>  
With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood there in front of Jesus, heard his cry and saw how he died, he said, "Surely this man was the Son of God". < Mk. 15:37-39>

The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, "Surely this was a righteous man." <Lk.23:47 - NIV>

Having seen each stage of the crucifixion that Jesus kept silence on the cross, made no protest and did not curse the people who nailed him, but prayed for the

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<sup>67</sup> J. Nolland, *World Biblical Commentary* vol.35a, Edit. R.P. Martin, (1989), 314.

<sup>68</sup> J.A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*, (1983), 648-50; I.H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: a Commentary on the Greek Text*, (1978), 277-78.

forgiveness of the multitude's sins, the centurion felt some special respect, even awe, saying, "Surely this man was the Son of God," though Luke's record presents him as said differently, "Surely this was a righteous man." Such process of the stages or the manner of Jesus' death might be the reason for the exclamation of the centurion.<sup>69</sup>

The third one is the centurion named Julius who escorted Paul to Rome in Acts 27:1-44.

When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius, who belonged to the Imperial Regiment. We boarded a ship from Adramyttium about to sail for ports along the coast of the province of Asia, and we put out to sea. Aristarchus, a Macedonian from Thessalonica, was with us. The next day we landed at Sidon; and Julius, in kindness to Paul, allowed him to go to his friends so they might provide for his needs. From there we put out to sea again and passed to the lee of Cyprus because the winds were against us. When we had sailed across the open sea off the coast of Cilicia and Pamphylia, we landed at Myra in Lycia. There the centurion found an Alexandrian ship sailing for Italy and put us on board. We made slow headway for many days and had difficulty arriving off Cnidus. When the wind did not allow us to hold our course, we sailed to the lee of Crete, opposite Salmone. We moved along the coast with difficulty and came to a place called Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea. Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Fast. So Paul warned them, "Men, I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our own lives also." But the centurion, instead of listening to what Paul said, followed the advice of the pilot and of the owner of the ship. .... But the ship struck a sandbar and ran aground. The bow stuck fast and would not move, and the stern was broken to pieces by the pounding of the surf. The soldiers planned to kill the prisoners to prevent any of them from swimming away and escaping. But the centurion wanted to spare Paul's life and kept them from carrying out their plan. He ordered those who could swim to jump overboard first and get to land. The rest were to get there on planks or on pieces of the ship. In this way everyone reached land in safety. <Acts 27:1-11, 41-44 - NIV>

The demeanor of Julius, unlike that of the three other centurions, was more or less neutral towards Paul's religion. After his arrest, Paul had to be sent to Rome under guard for the judgment of the Roman court and, together with some other prisoners,

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<sup>69</sup> W.L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark*, (1982), 575-76.

was put in charge of a centurion of the Augustan Cohort. The Scripture narrates that Julius from the beginning tended to trust Paul (Acts 27:3). After the ship in which Paul and the other prisoners were sailed had put in at Sidon, Julius allowed Paul to visit his friends in the town. In spite of a situation in which Julius might be expected to treat Paul harshly, he was in fact rather generous to him. This shows that Paul was not treated as a typical prisoner, and Paul's captivity, as the journey goes on, becomes even more superficial. During and directly after the storm, in particular, he becomes the de facto leader of the mission, and leads everyone on board to safety. Although it is not certain why the centurion treated him so favourably, it is clear that he must have regarded Paul as an upright and trustworthy man, whose demeanour must have influenced Julius' impression of Paul's faith.

The last example here, though it was third in the written sequence in Acts 10:1-48, is Cornelius.

The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. "Stand up," he said, "I am only a man myself." Talking with him, Peter went inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?" Cornelius answered: "Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, 'Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.' So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us." Then Peter began to speak: "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. ... While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. <Acts 10:24-35, 44-45 – NIV>

The author of Acts presents him as a God-fearing gentile, together with his entire household and as a wholly faithful man who gave generously to those in need and regularly prayed to God. He had a vision of an angel of God telling him to send men to Joppa to call for Simon Peter and he obeyed the order. Peter was at this time staying in Joppa with a leather-worker named Simon. As Peter was on the roof, praying, he too had a vision in which he saw a large sheet full of “all kind of animals, reptiles and wild birds” (10:12), many of them condemned by the dietary laws in the Old Testament as ritually unclean, which he was commanded to kill and eat. On account of these laws, Peter refused to do so, but he recognized God’s voice telling him, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:15). No sooner had he woken from his dream than messengers arrived asking him to go to their master, Cornelius. The following day Peter followed them, reached Cornelius’ place in Caesarea and met him with his relatives and close friends whom Cornelius had invited. As Cornelius and his household listened, they responded to Peter’s message and Peter had to accept that they were true believers in Jesus, for he saw the Holy Spirit resting on them. These are the images that the Scripture gives of centurions.

However, for the Jews in the first century the image of Roman soldiers and general view of Roman centurions seems quite different from the images given in the Scripture. Their task of controlling the social system and maintain order in the subject nations was prone to present the image of a tyrant or plunderer. Examples of this can be drawn from some anecdotes of centurions: the bribes offered to centurions caused poverty for the soldiers (*Ann.*1.17; cf. *Hist.*1.46); violence and avarice appear in the literature as the chief characteristics of the centurions.<sup>70</sup> Luke reports the soldiers

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<sup>70</sup> J.R. Howell, “The Imperial Authority and Benefaction of Centurions and Acts 10.34-43: A Response to C. Kavin Rowe,” *JSNT* 31.1, (2008), 37-38.

bearing a similar image in the answer of John the Baptist, when he was asked by some soldiers who were listening his preaching what to do, “Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely, but be content with your pay” (Luke 3:14).

Campbell comments:

This may refer to the soldiers of king Herod, but the behaviour of Roman troops is not likely to have been any better. ... It is assumed as a matter of course that soldiers will supplement their pay with illegal exactions and act as informers, presumably for profit. Indeed the troops are classed with tax-gathers, the most hated of all groups.<sup>71</sup>

J.R. Howell, through Suetonius’s description of Sabinus, the Emperor Vespasian’s father, presents centurions and tax collectors as partners and says that certain roles were shared by these groups and this shows what the general reputation of centurions is likely to have been.<sup>72</sup>

From this above, it would appear that the individual images of centurions described in the Scripture and the stereotype conceived in the first century by the general population bear scant resemblance to each other. How then would the ancient audience have received the narratives about centurions in the NT? What was the intention or purpose of Luke in particular in apparently ignoring the greedy and tyrannical centurions?

A variety of opinions exist on the exact nature and purpose of Luke; however, this subject is too broad to deal with in this chapter. Instead, what it is indisputable among the scholars is that Luke had an apologetic purpose and the centurions mentioned in

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<sup>71</sup> J.B. Campbell, *The Emperor and the Roman Army; 31BC - AD235*, (1984), 248.

<sup>72</sup> J.R. Howell, “The Imperial Authority and Benefaction of Centurions and Acts 10.34-43: A Response to C. Kavin Rowe,” (2008), 39.

Acts are likely to have been chosen with this purpose in mind, as well as the decision to exclude other officials who typified the tyrannical and greedy extreme.

#### **4.4 Summary and Conclusion**

The status of centurions, as their high emoluments reflect, was fairly important in Roman society, both for their role of maintaining order in the army and society whether in peace or war and for their great military power and extensive experience. Yet the images of them among the Jews were opposite. In contrast to the presentation of the four centurions presented in the New Testament, who were all well-disposed or at least not hostile toward the Jews and Judaism regardless of their status, centurions seemed to the Jews of the time typically arrogant and rapacious though this is hardly true of any of Luke's centurions.

The Scripture, because its authors wrote for apologetic purposes,<sup>73</sup> would have mentioned only the centurions who had shown an extraordinary level of belief or distinguished courtesy towards Judaism or Jesus. For the same reason, the centurions with typical features, and also any restrictions or punishment that might have been issued to Roman officers who converted to Judaism would not have been mentioned. In this regard, more discussion and investigation of the purposes of Luke would be useful.

Other surviving records apart from the Scripture which mention Roman officer converts, or any restriction or punishment of them on the part of the Roman Empire for their conversion, are rare. There are instead some records of occasional cases of the spread of the Jewish religion into the higher classes of Roman society. Thus, any

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<sup>73</sup> See. Luke 1:3-4; John 20:31.

discussion on the possibility of a centurion's conversion seems to need a more comprehensive reconstruction of the political and social environment before a fuller answer can be reached.

## **CHAPTER 5 THE POLICY OF THE WORLD POWERS AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE TOWARDS JUDAISM**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Historically, the Mosaic Law had immense meaning for the Jews, for it was considered the supreme law of their faith in Yahweh and also was concerned with matters of cult and civil life. It served as a criterion for Jewish identity in the Diaspora communities. Jewish communities with this Law practised their own jurisdiction and held courts of justice according to its guidance for all their members. Further, whenever the Jews' faith in Yahweh was threatened or restricted by foreign authorities, strong movements of opposition arose to defend it.<sup>74</sup>

How then did this religious fervour of the Jews, when they were under the dominion of world powers, influence the policy of these world powers towards them? In other words, what were the religious privileges that the Jews enjoyed under the world powers and under the Roman Empire, on account of their Judaism? Was the Roman policy towards the Jews and Judaism identically practised in Rome and in the provinces before and in the first century?

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<sup>74</sup> Antiochus IV (215-164 BC), the Seleucid ruler of Syria, once attempted to downgrade the faith of Yahweh into that of a local Baal and to prohibit the practice of the Mosaic Law in order to simplify Israel to the condition of a Hellenistic state. This became one of the reasons for the Maccabean Wars (167-42 BC) which resulted in the independence of Judea; see. S.B. Shim, *Sin-yak-Seo-Ron*, [신약서론 *New Testament Introduction*], (1998), 47; W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church: from the beginnings to 461*, (1986), 16.

These issues are worth considering for the configuration of the status of Judaism and of the political and the social context of the first century. In order to do this, the chapter will discuss the preserved sources of ancient historians, headed by the records of Josephus, which are immensely important in reconstructing the political and social context of the era, for they provide considerable information, on the main matters of concern in this research in particular, i.e., the political and religious privileges that the Jews enjoyed under the world powers and the Roman empire and the range of the spread of Judaism.

## **5.2 Judaism under the World Powers**

The dispersion of the Jews began in 587 BC, after the sack of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, when the inhabitants of the southern kingdom of Judah migrated to beyond the Euphrates. Some of them formed a large community of the Diaspora and they remained in Babylonia and Mesopotamia, even after the rescinding of the decree of expulsion by Cyrus, the founder of the Persian Empire (559-529 BC).<sup>75</sup>

Cyrus and his successors attempted to maintain the order of their society without any massive resistance or riot of their subject nations, by bestowing certain basic rights on their subject nations, i.e. to live in their homeland and practise their own religion, instead of compelling them to worship the gods of the master-race; on occasion, the authorities even extended financial aid to support these rights.<sup>76</sup>

The account of the Scripture is even more favourable: the edict of Sheshbazzar, in the time of Cyrus, laid the foundations for the temple in Jerusalem (Ezra5:16; Zech.4:9); Zerubbabel, in the time of Darius, resumed the construction of the temple

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<sup>75</sup> E.M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, (1976), 120.

<sup>76</sup> F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit*, (1977), 26-7.

and finished it in 515 BC (Ezra6:15), and Nehemiah, commissioned as governor of Judah by Artaxerxes, constructed a wall around Jerusalem (Neh.6:15). In spite of the interruption by opponents, those constructions were protected by the kings' edicts and were finally completed (Ezra 6-7; Neh.6).

Cyrus and his successors may have had their own reasons for their benefactions to the Jews, parallel to Cyrus' benefactions to the temple of Marduk in Babylon, but Jewish sources of the Jews, as well as the Scriptural account, tend to regard the gentile benefactors as motivated by some special affection for Judaism: "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah" (Ezra1:2).

Despite the possible misunderstanding or arbitrary interpretation by the Jews of the political intentions of the kings of Persia, the one certainty as far as the Jews were concerned is that they could enjoy their religious privileges under them.

Conditions became even more favourable for the Jews when Persia was occupied by the Greeks and Macedonians after the conquests of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC). Jews could live by the Torah and could be exempted from tribute in a Sabbatical year and Alexander even allowed the Jews who volunteered for his army to observe the Torah.<sup>77</sup> It also seems to be recognized that the three ancient documents written by the Jews, which describe how Alexander the Great dealt with the Jews,<sup>78</sup> like with the Jewish records of Cyrus and Artaxerxes, were interpreted and edited from the Jewish point of view.

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<sup>77</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XI*, 338-39.

<sup>78</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XI*, 321-45; *Megillat Ta'anit* 21 Kislev; Hans Lichtenstein, "Die Fastenrolle," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 8-9, (1931-2), 339-40; *Anonymi Byzantini Vita Alexandri regis Macedonum*, edit. Juergen Trumpf, (1974), 76-8.

When the empire of Alexander was scattered at his death, Judea was subject first to the dynasty of the Ptolemies and then (after 198 BC) to that of the Seleucids.<sup>79</sup> Jerusalem and Judea, however, were still able to maintain their sacral privileges, except when attempts were made to abolish or distort them, until the outbreak of the Jewish revolt against Rome in AD 66.

The Jews' enthusiasm for their Law takes centre stage with the notable and unsuccessful attempt of Antiochus IV, the Seleucid king (175-164 BC), to abolish the sacral constitution of Jerusalem and Judea: he tried, mainly for reasons of external security, to assimilate the culture and religion of the Jews to the Hellenistic way of life throughout the period of his dominion, but the probable reaction of the Jews was not considered seriously enough and for this reason his policy ended in failure. This caused the revolt of the Jews under the leadership of Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers, after which the Jews regained their religious liberty in 164 BC and twenty-two years later, thanks to the internal strife within the Seleucid Kingdom, gained political independence.<sup>80</sup>

For nearly eighty years Judea was ruled by the native Hasmonaean dynasty of priest-kings. This dynasty was then abolished and Judaea became a province of the Roman Empire after the occupation of Pompey in 63 BC.

For more than thirty years after Pompey's settlement, the Roman world was the scene of a series of struggles for political supremacy. However, Cleopatra, the last sovereign of Ptolemaic Egypt, and her Roman ally Antony, were brought down by their defeat at the naval battle of Actium in 31 BC and Octavian, adopted as the son and political heir of Julius Caesar, became the new master of the Roman world.

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<sup>79</sup> S.B. Shim, *Sin-yak-seo-ron* [신약서론 *New Testament Introduction*], (1998), 43.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, 48-51.

Octavian declined to be called king, preferring instead the title Augustus, and so preserved the outward appearance of the republican system, but he alone held the central power of the Roman state.

V. Tcherikover, a specialist in the Hellenistic period, testifies that the Jews of the time had settled as aliens with a measure of self-determination and they were the only ethnic group out of several which asked to be exempted from participation in the city's cults.<sup>81</sup> The Jews had a characteristic enthusiasm for the Mosaic Law and their faith in Yahweh and these proclivities must have been an important consideration for other world powers who sought peace with Israel when they had conquered it.

### **5.3 Judaism under the Roman Empire**

The attitude of the Roman Empire towards the religion of their subject nations is one of the themes that have interested historians, as it is one of the criteria by which empires are judged and it also throws considerable light on their religious policy and its operation regarding the religions of the subject nations.

The first administrative step of the Roman state in Judaea was the holding of a census in order to obtain accurate information about the region and its financial resources, which was essential for assessing its tax capability. Tribute had been imposed by Rome on the Jewish client kingdom ever since 63 BC, in the form of a land-tax. Hence, the Jews in Judaea must have endured double taxation: the tribute to Caesar and the temple taxes which were more than a tithe.<sup>82</sup> These formed a heavy burden, bringing poverty to most of the people.

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<sup>81</sup> V. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, trans. S. Applebaum, (1961), 297-98.

<sup>82</sup> F. C. Grant, *The Economic Background of the Gospels*, (1926), 87.

In the early stages, the governance of the Roman Empire over the Jews was indirect, through a Jewish ruler, Herod the Great (37-4 BC). However, he violated constitution of the temple more ruthlessly than had any gentile overlord except Antiochus IV. From AD 6 when Judaea became a province of the Roman Empire, a similar two-tier administration as had operated under Persian and Greco-Macedonian rule was introduced: a provincial governor, a procurator, was responsible for maintaining peace and order and for ensuring the efficient collection of the 'tribute to Caesar,' but the internal affairs of the Jews in Judea were administered by the high priest, together with the Sanhedrin, a council of seventy elders.

Rome had a fundamentally pragmatic policy towards Jews because they did not want further national incidents or conflict in their stable empire. Josephus preserves a considerable number of official documents<sup>83</sup> which show some exemptions by Caesar and Augustus and some similar documents from Roman magistrates or governors of the late Republic or early empire, which all have the purpose of assuring the Jews the right to practise their religion and retain their privileges.

The religious life of the Jews in around the first century cannot be discussed without considering the Imperial cult, which was practised in all the provinces and among all classes and groups in the empire before the triumph of Christianity.<sup>84</sup> The Imperial cult, in Asia Minor in particular, spread so widely that it could be found in all local communities and among all associations.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIV 185-267; XVI 169-179.

<sup>84</sup> D. Fishwick, "Subject and ruler: the cult of the ruling power in classical antiquity," *JRA* Supplementary series no.17, edit. A. Small, (1996), 254-61.

<sup>85</sup> S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and power: the Roman imperial cult in Asia Minor*, (1984), 2-3.

Under these incompatible obligations, some imposed by Rome and others by their Law, were the Jews assured by the State of protection for their religion and ancestral customs?

Josephus quotes six documents as evidence that the Roman emperors had always been friendly to the Jews: two of the six were a letter and an edict of the Emperor addressed to the authorities in the provinces and the remainder consisted of letters from provincial authorities in which they mention the order of the Emperor.<sup>86</sup> All the letters show the desire of the Emperor to protect the Jews and their religion.

But there is no reason to assume that all the emperors' policies toward Jews and Judaism would necessarily have been implemented identically in the provinces and in Rome. The evidence shows that the existing policies towards Jews were at times carried out in slightly different ways, depending on the emperors and also on the procurators.

Sometimes the policy towards the Jews diametrically opposes those of two governors under the same emperor. The attitudes of Pontius Pilate and of the next temporary governor, Vitellius, towards the Jews and Judaism provide good examples of this. Just after becoming the procurator of Judaea, Pilate tried to set up military standards to which busts of the Emperor were attached, but this disturbed the Jews, not only because their law in any case forbade the making of images, but even more because the attempt was timed to "coincide with the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles."<sup>87</sup> This attempt ended in failure after the fierce protests of the Jews;

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<sup>86</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XVI*, 160-72; See note 108.

<sup>87</sup> E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, (1976), 161.

Pilate finally surrendered after six days and allowed the images to be taken back to Caesarea.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast, the attitude of Vitellius, the proconsul of Syria, was conciliatory. He became the temporary governor of Judaea shortly after Pilate was sent to Rome to explain himself when the Samaritan senate complained that he had killed innocent people. Under Vitellius, all the taxes on sales of agricultural produce were exempted and the control of the high priest's vestments, which had been taken over by Rome in AD 6, was restored.<sup>89</sup> Further, when Vitellius' army was about to march through the land of Judaea on their way to fight Aretas, the Arab king of Petra, some of the Jewish authorities petitioned him to refrain, for the similar reason that bringing the images inscribed on the standards into the land of Judaea was a contravention of the Jewish Law. Granting this request, he went so far as to sacrifice to God in Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover, as well as ordering his army to march around the land.<sup>90</sup>

The striking contrast between the behaviour of those two Roman appointees shows that they had considerable independent authority for dealing with the people under their charge. As a matter of fact, the proconsuls in the regions were seldom called to account when their sovereign power ended, except in cases of excessive abuses of power, such as Pilate's, above.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War II*, 169-74; *Jewish Antiquities XVIII*, 55-9.

<sup>89</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XVIII*, 90-3.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid*, 120-23.

<sup>91</sup> A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, (1963), 2.

## 5.4 The Roman Emperors and Judaism before AD 50

### 5.4.1 Julius Caesar (100-44 BC)

The general policy of Julius Caesar, *dictator* of the Roman republic (45-44BC), was repressive towards any associations in Rome that sought to serve political ends; he banned all religious cults other than those existing from earlier times. Nonetheless, he not only exempted the Jewish communities from this ban, but also granted them numerous exceptional privileges. The principal concession was the free exercise of their national religion and exemption from any duties or responsibilities which were irreconcilable with the Jewish Law. Moreover, the Jews were not prevented from making communal contributions and from holding assemblies. These privileges were embodied in a series of edicts which were sent by the order of Caesar and, after his death, by Antonius, to the provincial governors of the various cities in which Jewish synagogues existed. Not only this, but the Jews were allowed to send the annual temple tax to Jerusalem, could have juridical competence over their own people and were exempted from any observances that contradicted the first principle of their Law, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” If these privileges were disregarded by the authorities, the Emperor would confirm by letter that religious liberty, including customs, contributing money to common meals and the sacred rites of the Jews were protected by statute even in Rome and their religion and rites must not be disturbed.<sup>92</sup>

One of Julius Caesar’s reasons for granting Jews these exceptional privileges was the friendly alliance between them and Rome<sup>93</sup>: when Rome demanded Jewish help to resist the Seleucids in 161 BC, the Jews sent support through an embassy from

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<sup>92</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XIV*, 213-16.

<sup>93</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Early Church: from the beginnings to 461*, (1986), 16.

Judas Maccabaeus. Hence Julius Caesar considered the Jews to be friends and allies, ‘*socii et amici populi Romani*’, and the Jews continued to be treated by Rome as their ally; thus they were granted numerous religious privileges.

Now it displeases me that such statutes should be made against our friends and allies and that they should be forbidden to live in accordance with their customs and to contribute money to common meals and sacred rites, for this they are not forbidden to do even in Rome.<sup>94</sup>

After the death of Caesar in 44 BC, the consuls and the summoned Senate decided to continue the policy of Julius Caesar and made a treaty of friendship with the Jews.<sup>95</sup> Further similar pronouncements by Augustus and Agrippa functioned to secure a general toleration and protection of the Jewish communities in the Roman Empire.<sup>96</sup>

#### **5.4.2 Augustus (27 BC-AD 14)**

The society under the dominion of Augustus (Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus Augustus) was complex and diverse, as Salmon says: “There was no common language, no common culture, no common way of life, no common conception of national destiny.”<sup>97</sup>

Augustus, well aware of this diversity, sought a unifying bond which would be acceptable to the people in both the western and eastern halves of the Empire, in the field of religion. It was the ruling ideology of Rome to integrate the state and the

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<sup>94</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XIV*, 214.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, 217-18.

<sup>96</sup> E. Schürer, *The History of the People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, edit. G. Vermes, F. Millar & M. Goodman, (1986), 119.

<sup>97</sup> E.T. Salmon, *A History of the Roman World: from 30BC to AD138*, (1944), 28.

religion<sup>98</sup>: the system of Imperial cult as a type of religion as well as a national cult was enforced from the time of Augustus.

The system of Imperial cult was inspired to a very large extent by the well-known practice of ruler-worship in the Eastern Mediterranean; but elsewhere in the Empire the worship of people took a different form. While the populations on the eastern side of the Mediterranean worshipped great and honoured rulers in history, those on the western side worshipped their ancestors, the people most sacred to the nation of Rome.<sup>99</sup>

Augustus combined these tendencies into one system, Imperial cult, so that both halves could abide by the system without difficulty and the apotheosis of the Emperor was officially initiated in 42 BC following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BC. He first became a member of the priesthood in charge of Roman national cults and thereafter '*pontifex maximus*', the high priest, integrating the politics and the religion, and the supreme commander in both areas. Though he did not officially impose the personal worship of himself, he sanctified the Imperial house as one of the holy places where the gods of the empire were situated. As a result, the Imperial house itself became the object of worship<sup>100</sup> and Augustus had the prerogative of supreme command over both the state and the religion, for the Emperor had become the high priest and, moreover was to be worshipped as 'a god' after his death.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> S. R. F. Price, "Jong-gyo-ui-sik-gwa-Gwon-lyeok," [종교의식과 권력 Religious Rites and Power], in *Paul-gwa-Ro-ma-je-kuk*, [바울과 로마제국 *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*], edit. R. A. Horsley, (2007), 90.

<sup>99</sup> D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult in the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire Vol.2*, (1992), 92-3.

<sup>100</sup> A. H. Richard (Ed.), in his Introduction to *Paul-gwa-Ro-ma-je-kuk* [바울과 로마제국 *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*], (2007), 39-40.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 90: S. R. F. Price, "Jong-gyo-ui-sik-gwa-Gwon-lyeok," [종교의식과 권력 Religious Rites and Power], in *Paul and Empire*, (2007).

Nevertheless, though this system of Imperial cult was enforced in all the provinces of the Empire, Augustus allowed subject nations to preserve their own customs and the religions descended from their ancestors and had an edict to this effect read aloud in all the cities and provinces.<sup>102</sup>

The following are the religious privileges which the Jews continued to enjoy under Augustus: exemption from the Imperial cult, an uninterrupted observation of their religious cults, permission to collect the annual Temple tax, the classification of synagogues as colleges (*collegia*) in order to get around Roman laws banning secret societies, and permission for the manumitted Jews to stay in Rome, enjoying citizenship and religious liberty.

His consideration for the Jews was even more scrupulous; if the distribution of corn took place on the Sabbath, he ordered that any Jews entitled to receive it should have their portion reserved until the next day.<sup>103</sup> Further, Augustus, recognizing that graven images were prohibited to the Jews, allowed the minting of copper coins without the Emperor's head for local use<sup>104</sup> and accepted sacrifices with prayer conducted in the temple as a substitute for participation in the imperial cult on condition that daily sacrifices and prayer on behalf of the Emperor were offered in the Temple.

This was a preferable compromise for both sides: for the Jews it was in accord with the Scripture instruction to pray for the king and for the peace and prosperity of the city to which they had been carried (Ezra 6:10; Jerem. 29:7) and was also a way of avoiding idolatry, as part of the Imperial cult, while for the Roman authorities it could be a means of ascertaining the loyalty of the Jews to the Empire. Even in

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<sup>102</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIX, 282-291.

<sup>103</sup> E.G. Hardy, *Christianity and the Government*, (1925), 17.

<sup>104</sup> E.M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, (1976), 148.

Jerusalem, there was enough room to sacrifice twice a day on behalf of the Emperor “at least until the outbreak of the Roman War.”<sup>105</sup>

However, there were some cases when the civic and religious liberty of the Jews in the provinces was restricted, unlike that of the Jews in Rome: renewed attacks on the civic rights of the Jews were launched and additional temple tax was levied by the Greek authorities of two provinces, Asia and Cyrenalea. As a result, delegations were sent to protest and Augustus reconfirmed by letter the civic rights and the religious liberty of the Jews, including the right to collect the temple tax.<sup>106</sup>

The repeated complaints of the Jews against the theft of the Temple tax and the repeated Roman reassertions of the Jews’ rights were among the main causes of conflict between the Jews and the provincial authorities. These sporadic troubles lead us to assume two possibilities: one is that provincial governors may have exerted considerable and autonomous authority in dealing with the religious privileges which the Emperor’s edit had granted and the other, conversely, is that the practical application of the Imperial policy of Emperor could be different in the provinces and in Rome.

### **5.4.3 Tiberius (AD 14-37)**

Tiberius (Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar), unlike his initial image as a modest Emperor, gradually became tyrannical: he gave himself up to lascivious activities in a secret room and was notorious for persecuting his relatives as well as killing his friends and others in the ruling class.

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<sup>105</sup> C. K. Rowe, “Luke - Acts and the Imperial Cult: a Way through the Conundrum?” *JSNT* 27, (2005), 283.

<sup>106</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XVI*, 160-65; 171-72; See. note 88.

Early on, he banned all non-Roman creeds, on the pretext of controlling public morals, the main targets being the religions of Israel and Egypt. He ordered the believers to destroy by fire the garments, instruments and furniture of worship and whatever belonged to it. The Jews in the provinces could enjoy their religious privileges, but in Rome the Jews suffered considerable damage from this harshness.<sup>107</sup>

One of the most severe ordeals for the Jews under Tiberius occurred in AD 19. A noble Roman lady named Fulvia, who converted to Judaism, had been induced by four Jewish swindlers to part with money said to be for the adornment of the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>108</sup> Tiberius took this opportunity to act decisively against the Jewish communities in Rome by two methods, conscription and expulsion.

The first method was to expel the Jews from Rome; the population of the Jews in Rome in the early stages of the empire is generally agreed by scholars to have been probably 40,000 to 50,000,<sup>109</sup> and their proselytizing activities, as the case of Fulvia, were regarded as disruptingly dangerous to Roman order. A.D. Clarke estimates, through “the amount of grain that was necessary to feed the city,” that the approximate number of male adult citizens eligible for the grain dole in Rome between AD 14 and AD 37 was 150,000 and the total population during the early Principate is widely accepted as 1,000,000.<sup>110</sup> The activities of the Jews, as well as their presence in Rome, by being linked with the incident of Fulvia, prompted Tiberius to expel them.

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<sup>107</sup> Suetonius, “Tiberius” in *History of Twelve Caesars*, 36.1, trans. Philemon Holland (1923), 26-75.

<sup>108</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XVIII*, 79-84.

<sup>109</sup> A.D. Clarke, “Rome and Italy,” *The Book of Acts in its first Century Setting Vol.2*, edit. D.W. J. Gill & C. Gempf, (1994), 465.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

The second method was conscription. Exemption from military service was one of the privileges which Augustus granted to the Jews, but Tiberius withdrew it from the Jews in Rome. The minority of Jews who held Roman citizenship were thus liable for legionary service and the rest for auxiliary service. Many of them, however, refused military service, because soldiers had to follow the Imperial cult, which contravened their Law; for this they were sentenced to life imprisonment.<sup>111</sup> The remaining young Jewish conscripts were sent to provinces where the heat could be intolerable.<sup>112</sup>

Martin Goodman adds the coincidence of a national crisis and the death of Germanicus as another reason for the expulsion; it was believed that the religious rites of the Jews had caused the sickness and death of the Roman people.<sup>113</sup>

However, it was not long before the Jewish community came back to Rome and the policy of Tiberius towards the Jews and Judaism was maintained without major change from that of Augustus. Thus Jews could still have religious liberty and the religious leaders could exercise power in their communities under the limits of the emperor's edict.

#### **5.4.4 Caligula (AD 37-41)**

The policy of Caligula (Gaius Caesar Germanicus, Caligula AD 37-41) towards the Jews during his four-year reign was highly provocative. He was much more cruel and brutal than his predecessors toward the Jews and their religion. As his nickname,

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<sup>111</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XV*, 17-57.

<sup>112</sup> Suetonius, "Tiberius" in *History of twelve Caesars*, 36.1, 26-75.

<sup>113</sup> M. Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: the Clash of Ancient Civilizations* (2007), 386; Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, trans. Michael Grant, (1989), 118.

‘*Caligula*’ (little combat boots)<sup>114</sup> suggests, he was warmly acclaimed when he ascended to the throne, but his shameless and cruel personality was soon revealed: poisoning Tiberius, killing other relatives, committing incest, having sexual relationships with the wives of the high-ranking officials, his vicious plundering of everyone’s possessions, methods of execution and massacres and gladiatorial games in the amphitheatre. This indiscriminate cruelty extended to his policy towards the Jews and Judaism.<sup>115</sup>

His plan to install statues of himself as a god in the Temple in Jerusalem and also in synagogues provoked the strong resistance of the Jews: having anticipated this, he ordered Publius Petronius, governor of Syria, to take two legions to Jerusalem when he brought the statue to the Temple.<sup>116</sup> This plan was devised and demanded by the Alexandrian Greeks and it corresponded with his intentions.

In these circumstances, Agrippa, in spite of his friendship with Caligula and at some risk to himself, sent an ambassador to Caligula from Alexandria; this was Philo, widely known as one of the greatest scholars and at the time the holder of several eminent official positions.<sup>117</sup> He appealed on behalf of the Alexandrian Jews against the injustice of the Emperor’s order:

I, as you know, am by birth a Jew and my native city is Jerusalem in which is situated the sacred shrine of the most high God. ... This temple, my Lord Gaius, has never from the first admitted any figure wrought by men’s hands, because it is the sanctuary of the true God. For the works of painters and modelers are representations of gods perceived by sense but to paint or mould a

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<sup>114</sup> Suetonius, “Caligula” in *History of Twelve Caesars*, 9.2, (He received this nickname from the general soldiers for he had been brought up to eat and dress like one of them and so they loved him).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 22-30; 34-9; 22. 2.

<sup>116</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XVIII* 257-272.

<sup>117</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church: from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G.A. Williamson, (1989), 40.

likeness of the invisible was held by our ancestors to be against their religion. Your grandfather Agrippa visited and paid honour to the temple and so did Augustus ... Your great grandmother too.<sup>118</sup>

In addition, Petronius who had been sent to carry out the command of Caligula, despite the risk, sent a letter to Caligula to ask him to withdraw his instruction and begging for permission for the Jews to keep their law. The complaint of the Jews and the appeal of Petronius, however, were dismissed and in fact made matters worse: to the Jews he sent the contemptuous reply, “Men who think me no god are more unfortunate than criminals”<sup>119</sup> and to Petronius a letter threatening him with death for the delay in following his instruction. Fortunately for both, Caligula was assassinated before any cruel slaughter by the Roman army could begin.

But as it happened the messengers who carried this reply were held up for three months by storms at sea, while others who brought news of Gaius’ death had a good voyage, so that Petronius received intimation of this event four weeks earlier than the denunciation of himself.<sup>120</sup>

#### **5.4.5 Claudius (AD 41-54)**

Claudius (Tiberius Claudius Nero Caesar Drusus), on his enthronement in AD 41, fearing the rapid increase of the Jewish population, prohibited any Jewish gatherings which might possibly disrupt public order and even dispersed the clubs and unruly taverns used by the Jews.<sup>121</sup> However, he was not hostile to them in principle, as is

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<sup>118</sup> M. Goodman, *Rome and Jerusalem: the Clash of Ancient Civilizations*, (2007), 88.

<sup>119</sup> Cited by E.T. Salmon, *A History of the Roman World: from 30BC to AD138*, (1944), 154.

<sup>120</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War*, (1981), 141.

<sup>121</sup> C. Dio, *Dio’s Roman History* 60. 6. 6-7, edit. E. Capps, T.E. Page & W.H.D. Rouse, trans. E. Cary, (1927).

evidenced by the fact that he abolished the restrictions imposed on the Alexandrian Jews and approved the practice by the Jews of their ancestral customs without any hindrance, solely on condition that they should be observed in a more reasonable spirit and more discreetly.<sup>122</sup>

Meanwhile, the Jews' rights and the privileges in practising their religion in Rome once more reached a crisis when the second expulsion took place in AD 49. According to Suetonius, Claudius' reason for expelling them, though not given in detail, was the disturbances by the Jews at the instigation of *Chrestos*.<sup>123</sup>

It is not reported why he led disturbances or who Chrestos was, and his identity is disputed. Some scholars believe that the name refers to "Christ Jesus,"<sup>124</sup> but others disagree. '*Chrestos*' ('useful') in the Greek pronunciation of the time is identical to '*Christos*'. Bruce describes how this name created confusion:

Christos sounded exactly like a fairly common slave-name, Chrestos (Latin *Chrestus*) and among Greeks and Romans there was considerable confusion between the two spellings as also between christianoi and chrestiano. Even in Acts 11:26, where it is mentioned that "in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians", a few Greek witnesses to the text (including the first hand in Codex Sinaiticus) exhibit the spelling 'chrestianous' (accusative plural) instead of christianous. The latter is certainly what Luke wrote, but the former may well represent what some of the Antiochenes thought they were saying.<sup>125</sup>

For this reason, some scholars have held that those who uphold that *Chrestus* refers to 'Christ Jesus' incorrectly substituted a more familiar name for something less familiar. At all events, Claudius, aware of these incidents, perceived Christianity

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122 Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XIX, 284-291.

123 Suetonius. *Divvs Clavdivs*, 25. 4, edit. D. W. Hurley, (2001).

124 F.F. Bruce, *Sin-yak-sa*, [ *신약사 The New Testament History* ], trans. Y.W. Na, (1978), 313.

125 *Ibid*, 132.

as a schismatic Jewish denomination; before his time, the two religions were seen as essentially the same.<sup>126</sup>

What then was the scale of the expulsion of the Jews: did it involve only a small group of Jews or all the Jews in Rome, as the Scripture mentions (Acts 18:2)? The passage of Suetonius, 'Claudius expelled *Iudaeos*,'<sup>127</sup> as L.V. Rutgers mentions, could mean both, 'the Jews' or 'Jews.' Thus, he is inclined to suppose that the Jews expelled from Rome may have been a small group of them, but not the entire community.<sup>128</sup>

However, a similar situation was unlikely in the provinces: the Jews there could still enjoy their religious lives and practise the cults inherited from their forefathers without any disturbance. The Roman authorities did not interfere with the lives of the Jews regarding religious issues or disputations unless they harmed the social order or someone committed a crime which had to be tried in court. This guidance for the governors of Judea on how to deal with the 'Christian problem' was normal until the reign of Nero.

The presence of the Roman army in the provinces sometimes even safeguarded the Christians against persecution by Jews. Apart from AD 41 to AD 44, when Judaea was once more autonomous under Agrippa I, whose laws allowed Christians to be persecuted, the governors of provinces did not abandon the general rule of not

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<sup>126</sup> E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, (1976), 213; Arnaldo Momigliano, *Claudius: the Emperor and his Achievement, with a new bibliography (1942-59)*, trans. W.D. Hogarth, (1961), 100-01.

<sup>127</sup> Suetonius, *Divvs Clavdivs*, 25.4, (2001).

<sup>128</sup> L.V. Rutgers, "Roman Policy towards the Jews: Expulsions from the City of Rome during the First Century C.E.," *Classical Antiquity* 13, (1994), 62-5.

interfering in the Jews' religious affairs.<sup>129</sup> These Roman principles towards the Jews may be inferred from the words of Gallio in Acts 18: 12-17:

While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him into court. "This man," they charged, "is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law." Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, "If you Jews were making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law – settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things." So he had them ejected from the court. Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever. <NIV>

When the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem accused Paul before Antonius Felix (under Claudius) and Porcius Festus (under Nero),<sup>130</sup> the attitude of the Roman authorities shows that they held the same stance as they had at the time of Jesus' trial: the controversy between Christians and Jews belonged strictly to Jewish Law, as the Roman authorities saw it, and both the proconsul of Achaia and the procurator of Judea, declared that they did not wish to be involved in it. The edicts of Claudius favourable to the Jews are found throughout the work of Josephus.<sup>131</sup>

### **5.5 The Scope of the Juridical Competence of the Religious Leaders**

The range of the juridical competence of the Jews is a controversial issue: whether juridical competence over capital punishment was given to the Sanhedrin by the Roman Empire; whether execution authorized by the Sanhedrin was tolerated by

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<sup>129</sup> M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, (1986), 20.

<sup>130</sup> Acts 21; 23:28-9; 25:19.

<sup>131</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XIX*, 280-86, 288, 292, 310; *Jewish Antiquities XX*, 51, 100, 147, 202.

Roman authorities; and where exactly the limits of the juridical competence of the Jews lay.

The reason why the discussion on the scope of the juridical competence of the religious leaders needs here is that this directly presents how the Roman policy on the Jews and their religion was like and that it is believed that this is not irrelevant to the States' social and political demeanor on the religious life and even on the converts among the people of the time including Roman citizens.

The scope of competence seen through the record of the NT can be interpreted broadly. In the case of Jesus' trial, the Scripture seems to show that the Jews did not have the competence under the Roman Empire to execute any criminals according to their own religious law: they attempted to borrow the Roman authority to execute Jesus, accusing him of violating the Roman law.<sup>132</sup> It is likely that the Jews, if jurisdictional competence had been given to Sanhedrin by a Roman edict, would have executed Jesus according to their own religious law without taking him before a Roman authority.

However, the narrative of Stephen's execution seems to suggest that the Roman authorities left the management of religious issues in the hands of the Jewish religious leaders. When the Jews' fierce persecution of the Christians began, after the execution of Stephen (Acts 8), the Roman authorities tended to do nothing: they did not interfere deeply in the religious disputes of the Jews, but rather intervened to contain the problem and to stop it from fomenting.

That Saul set out to destroy the church and to arrest all Christians was with the approval of the high priest, not of any Roman; after his conversion to Christianity, the Jews in Damascus and at Antioch in Pisidia became extremely hostile to him. In these

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<sup>132</sup> Matt 27:20-26; Mark 15:6-15; Luke 23:13-25; John 18:31.

circumstances when accusations against him were brought by the Jews before the Imperial tribunals, the Roman authority played a rather protective and moderating role by preventing violence and outrage and by altogether refusing to abet or to assist the religious bigotry of the Jews.<sup>133</sup> What is apparent in this is that the Roman state regarded these matters as internal religious struggles between Jews and forbore to interfere in their affairs.

The first time Josephus suggests that the juridical competence of the Sanhedrin was applied is in the time of Julius Caesar. Caesar upheld the rights of the Sanhedrin, confirming Hyrcanus II, son of Alexander, as a high priest, and said “If, during this period, any question shall arise concerning the Jews’ manner of life, it is my pleasure that the decision shall rest with them.”<sup>134</sup> This principle was preserved without major changes under the ensuing emperors until the first century.

In the time of Herod the Great, the king did not interfere with the Sanhedrin’s authority and their rights in matters of religious law and the Sanhedrin or the Jewish Council could still exercise their powers, including juridical competence.

When Archelaus, who became tetrarch of Judaea after the death of Herod the Great in 4 BC, failed to maintain the country’s stability, he was dismissed by Augustus and a Roman governor was sent to Judaea. Subsequently the Jews, under the ensuing procurators, were given even more freedom to manage their affairs in their own way than they had had under Herod. The Roman state found an organ in the Council and put the Jews’ reciprocal cases under the adjudication of their own tribunals, from trivial cases at village level up to those heard by the high court in

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<sup>133</sup> E. G. Hardy, *Christianity and the Roman Government*, (1925), 31.

<sup>134</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XIV*, 195.

Jerusalem; religious issues were however under the competence of the Sanhedrin.<sup>135</sup> The Sanhedrin thus had authority to arrest and to punish the criminals who violated their law before and in the mid-first century.

The notable thing here is the scope of competence that the Sanhedrin could exercise within the limits of the Roman edict: whether Rome gave the Jews the competence to execute criminals; if it was not given, whether the Jews, under the occasional approval of the Empire, could execute religious criminals; or whether execution by the Sanhedrin or by the Jewish mob was tacitly tolerated to a certain extent by the Roman authorities are all uncertain. In fact, the NT leaves room for diverse possibilities about the scope of the Sanhedrin's juridical competence.

First of all, ancient historians mostly agree that the Sanhedrin had authority to judge and punish people who violated the Jewish law. The focal point of the controversy concerns the Sanhedrin's degree of authority to hand down capital sentences and order executions. Some say that the Sanhedrin had this authority but some are convinced that they had not, while others are sure that there is no clear evidence for either view.

Josephus states that capital punishment was one of the functions exercised by the Jewish supreme council as a juridical tribunal in trying cases: Ananias, the high priest, convening the judges of the Sanhedrin, held a hearing in which he sentenced to death James, the brother of Jesus, and others for transgressing the law and executed them all by stoning.<sup>136</sup>

It was in the period after between the death of Festus when the next procurator, Albinus, was on his way to the province that Ananias convened the judges of the

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<sup>135</sup> G.F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, (1927), 82.

<sup>136</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XX*, 200.

Sanhedrin<sup>137</sup>. Some who were considered the most fair-minded in the city informed Albinus that Ananias had no authority to do this and he was eventually deposed as high priest by Agrippa for this misuse of authority. This episode of course does not clearly reveal whether the Jews had juridical competence on this execution or not, for the deposition can be understood as punishment not for an act of arrogation but for an untimely act which threatened political damage to the King.

The statement of Titus in Josephus seems to support the view that the Sanhedrin had the competence for the execution: he mentions just before is account of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple that the Sanhedrin had authority to execute those who disregarded the notices warning gentiles and even Roman citizens not to enter the inner courts.<sup>138</sup> This seems to imply that the Sanhedrin's rules, as far as their Temple was concerned, were exceedingly strict and their juridical competence was given by the Roman state so that they could execute anyone without distinction who violated its law.

However Sherwin-White objects to this view, saying that it proves nothing about its ordinary competence over Jews, for the concession concerns the competence of the Sanhedrin over gentiles, including Roman citizens, not over Jews.<sup>139</sup> Further, the statement of Titus was not part of any factual narrative. He claims that the fact that Roman authority allowed the Sanhedrin to execute transgressors means that this execution must have been considered a special case. In other words, he means that the permission of the Roman authority would not have been necessary if the execution had been within the general competence of the Sanhedrin. However the question by Titus, "And didn't we give you leave to execute anyone who did go beyond it, even if

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid*, 200-03.

<sup>138</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War VI*, trans. G.A. Williamson, (1981), 124-7.

<sup>139</sup> A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman law in the New Testament*, (1963), 38.

he was a Roman?”<sup>140</sup> seems more likely to refer to the general competence which he provided rather than a competence in special cases.

The competence over capital sentencing, according to W.H.C. Frend, was absolutely under the authority of Rome: “The Jewish Sanhedrin was left in charge of local administration and remained the Supreme Court regarding matters of Jewish law. The death penalty, however, it could not impose.”<sup>141</sup> Sordi, on the basis of the edicts of Cyrene, says that the Sanhedrin was allowed to try and punish their own criminals in matters of religion, yet any crime carrying the death penalty under Jewish law had to be taken before the Roman court for judgment.<sup>142</sup> Ulpian (*Digest*, 1. 18) also says that the competence to order executions in the provinces was exclusively under the governors, while a rescript of Hadrian and an edict of Antoninus Pius (*Digest* 48.3.6 ff.) show an identical situation in the province of Asia.<sup>143</sup>

They commonly claim that juridical competence was given to the Jewish authorities but that all authority over executions was in the hands of the Roman courts. The most supportive verse for this view in the Scripture is John 18:31 (“... But we have no right to execute anyone...”) This seems to confirm that the Sanhedrin had no authority to execute Jewish criminals. It is, however, not enough to assert on the basis of this verse that they had no authority at all over executions.

What is the meaning of Pilate’s statement to the religious leaders of the Jews, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law” (John 18:31)? Did he mean that the Jews, by their autonomous judgment, could even execute Jesus? Why then

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<sup>140</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War VI*, (1981), 124-7.

<sup>141</sup> W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church: from the beginnings to 461*, (1986), 17.

<sup>142</sup> M. Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, (1986), 18; H. J. Cadbury, *Roman Law and the Trial of Paul, in the Beginnings of Christianity Vol.5*, (1933), 297-338.

<sup>142</sup> Cited by Sordi, *Ibid*, 11-12.

<sup>143</sup> Jejawon, *Gu-ren-d-jong-hab-seong-kung-ju-seok*, [*그랜드종합 성경주석, The Grand Bible Commentary*], Vol.15, edit. S.C. Han & S.Y. Kim, (1997), 327.

did the religious leaders say that they were not allowed to execute anyone? Here, there remains an interpretative question on the real meaning of the Sanhedrin's words when they said this.

The Grand Bible Commentary on this verse specifies that the Roman authority would have tolerated such an internal and minor execution, though no legal competence was formally given to the Jews.<sup>144</sup> Another possible interpretation is that Pilate made an attempt to be reconciled to the Jews by bestowing on them the authority for judgement on Jesus, since his relationship with the Jews was not of the best.<sup>145</sup> Both of these commentaries suggest the possibility that the Jewish leaders could exert the authority to execute or that such competence could at least be tolerated by the Roman authority.

As a matter of fact, no decisive evidence supports the view that the Sanhedrin had power over capital jurisdiction; however, some verses in the Scripture seem to say that the Jews had further authority on their jurisdiction: the Temple leaders seem to have had authority not only to arrest and try people but also even to execute them for religious offences at least, such executions seem to have been tolerated tacitly.

For example, when Jesus was taken out of the town to the brow of a hill so that those who had been infuriated by his teaching could throw him over the precipice (Luke 4:28, 29), there were no Roman authorities and no soldiers from Herod's court such as are seen in the descriptions in Luke. It seems in Luke's view that these actions of mob killing for a religious offence were not regarded as illegal, though this particular one did not succeed. If these were considered illegal, the multitude would not have dared to proceed, even in the absence of Roman soldiers or officials. This

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<sup>145</sup> KidokJihyesa, *The Chokma Commentary* Vol.16, (2000), 275.

event can be interpreted as showing that such actions were tolerated by the Roman authorities, regardless of their illegality.

Peter and John in Acts 4-5 are arrested twice by the religious leaders for disregarding their warning not to speak or teach of the law and they are tried by the Sanhedrin (5:26-27). On hearing the apostles' words, the Sanhedrin become very angry and want to execute them, but are prevented from doing so by the advice of Gamaliel, an advisor to the Pharisees (5:33-41). This seems to show that the Sanhedrin had the juridical competence on execution.

The scope of the Sanhedrin's juridical competence seems to be clearer in the cases of an adulterous woman (John 8:3-7) and Stephen's execution by the multitude (Acts 7:1-60). The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman caught in adultery and asked how she should be dealt with, reminding him of the legal position. This question, though it was meant to find some pretext to accuse Jesus of not solving a notorious problem, seems to be based upon the premise that they had juridical competence to even execute such criminals. If the judicial proceedings that they were about to employ were beyond the jurisdiction granted by the Roman state, they would not have asked Jesus about an execution under the Mosaic law. The answer of Jesus, by inviting all the Jews 'without sin' to put the woman to death (John 8:7), does not itself exclude the possibility of execution by the multitude.

Stephen's death (Acts 7) is a similar instance of mob action to execute. Stephen, on the charge of having been implicated in a blasphemy against Moses and God, was arrested by the multitude, the elders and the teachers of the law and brought to the Sanhedrin for trial. After his lengthy speech he was put to death in the Jewish manner, by stoning. Scripture presents that neither Roman officers nor soldiers of Herod were present, as in the case of the adulteress, and the execution proceeded without any

judgment by the governor or other Roman authorities and even without any inquiry being made to them in advance by the elders and the teachers of the law.

This raises the question whether the stoning of Stephen was by official judgment or occurred spontaneously and without forethought as a group action. The fact that the Jews executed him by stoning, though this may be supposed an accidental result of the crowd's action, shows that this manner of execution was taking place probably without the approval of the Roman authorities but with their tacit toleration. If the execution had been considered illegal or had not been tolerated by the Roman authority, the Jewish authorities would not have let the multitude execute him, but would have prevented such a death. The execution did in fact take place without the intervention of Roman authority. Herod's execution of James in Acts 12:2 also shows that it was at his own authority without Roman involvement.

A text of the Mishna, quoted by Juster, is another notable example: he presumes "this case to have occurred before the destruction of the Jerusalem in AD 70." It concerns a priest's daughter whose execution by burning was ordered by the Jewish tribunal under Jewish law for her adultery.<sup>146</sup> Sherwin-White quotes Origen's *Letter to Africanus*, in which he mentions, "There even take place trials according to the Law of Moses, secretly and men are condemned to death, neither entirely openly, nor yet without the knowledge of the emperor."<sup>147</sup>

Paul Winter brings forward support for this view, noting that capital sentences were already being passed by the supreme council of the Jews; his evidence is that a new form of execution, strangling, which is not recognized in the Old Testament, was

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<sup>146</sup> A.N. Sherwin-white, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, (1963), 41.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

introduced into the Mishnaic Code at the time of Jesus' trial.<sup>148</sup> If no system of execution were being used, the legislators would have never framed a new law. In other words, the fact that the legislators could introduce a new mode of administering the death penalty under the Mishnaic Code means that the death penalty and execution were already within the competence of the Jewish religious leaders. The addition of a form of strangulation to the forms of punishment in the Jewish courts before AD 70 significantly changes the assessment of their juridical competence in this period.

After all the analysis, the most likely conclusion about the Sanhedrin's juridical competence is that in the procuratorial period it had authority to arrest and punish criminals and that mob lynchings, the traditional manner of execution, remained the procedure in the provinces whether it was sanctioned by the Roman authorities or tolerated or implemented surreptitiously. In addition, it is difficult to conclude that the Sanhedrin had no competence to execute; and there is even a possibility that it wielded autonomous authority over executions.

## **5.6 Summary and Conclusion**

Traditionally, municipal liberty was given to the subject nations as a reward for loyalty to Rome. That the Jews could enjoy religious liberty and the traditional cults inherited from their fore-fathers and could have juridical competence on matters of their religion can be understood as part of the rewards.

The Roman Empire made an effort to satisfy the Jews, by granting considerable religious privileges. After Rome's conquest, the practice of Jewish religious traditions

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<sup>148</sup> Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, (1974), 102-3.

and cults from the early to mid-first century were scarcely restricted by the Roman state, except in minor cases. However, these policies were in practice differently implemented, depending on individual emperors or procurators and different provinces. Judaism was occasionally threatened and was in peril under certain Emperors.

The juridical competence of the Jews was given to their religious leaders, who could hold courts and pass sentences in all cases as long as they concerned religious issues. That the jurisdiction over execution was under Roman authority is widely upheld by numerous scholars; but the counterview is worth considering.

The relationship of these two opinions can be understood as complementary: there are differences to some degree between the proclamation of an edict and its practical application in the regions. In other words, it was more or less differently implemented in practice depending on the region, the procurator or the Emperor: occasional tolerations of executions by the procurators and occasional grants from the Emperor allowing the authority to execute, or conversely severe interventions and persecutions by the regional authorities took place, and so on.

It follows, then, that while it is not certain whether execution was within the general competence of the Jewish authorities in the mid-first century, it is certain that occasional executions by the Jewish authorities or lynchings took place whether under a general competence bestowed by the Roman Emperor or the tacit toleration of the Roman authorities of the time.

## **CHAPTER 6 THE REACTION OF THE ROMAN STATE ON THE GOD- FEARING CENTURION**

### **6.1 Introduction**

How would Cornelius' reputation as set out in Acts, first as a God-fearer and then as a believer in Jesus, after his encounter with Peter, have been taken by the Roman state?

From the first century, how far did the Jewish religions, including Christianity, spread in the gentile world until the mid-first century? What was the scale of gentile conversions to the Jewish religion and which classes of people did they mainly come from? Was there any restriction on conversions?

When these questions are applied in the context of the Roman Empire, how would the Roman state have handled them? This chapter investigates the possibility of the conversion of a Roman centurion in the political and social context of the time, by considering historical sources.

## 6.2 The Extent of the Spread of Judaism and Christianity in the Mid-first Century

In 1991, Rodney Stark, in an article on the relation of early Christianity to cities, claimed that the spread of Christianity bore some relation to the population of cities, since Christianity could expand more easily where there were Jews and synagogues.<sup>149</sup> In the following year, J.T. Sanders, commenting on Stark's article, pointed out the uncertainty and difficulty of any statistical approach to the population in an era two thousand years before due to the shortage of census figures and the inaccuracy of such as have survived, mostly in cities.<sup>150</sup>

The discussion on the range of social status among the Christians in the first century is parallel. G. A. Deissmann, a reputable German authority on papyrus records in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century claims on the basis of various papyruses from Egypt which were ascertained to be of the New Testament period, that the social status of an absolute majority of early Christians in the first century was lower-class, on the grounds that the Greek used in the NT was not the classic form but a demotic form which, he believed, was used by the lower class of people alone.<sup>151</sup>

Edwin Judge, a historian of the ancient world, however, believes that that this reasoning is shaky. Emphasizing that no one at the time when the NT was written was using classical Greek, he claims that the NT uses standard Greek, for the normal language was then the simple Greek which everyone used, not the specialists and

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<sup>149</sup> R. Stark, "Christianizing the urban empire: an analysis based on 22 Greco-Roman cities," *Sociological Analysis* 52, (1991), 77-88.

<sup>150</sup> J.T. Sanders, "Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire: a Conversation with Rodney Stark," *Sociological Analysis* 53, (1992), 433-445.

<sup>151</sup> A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East: the New Testament illustrated by recently discovered Texts of the Greco-Roman World*, (1927), 10.

technicians only.<sup>152</sup> The early Christian community, he thus infers, could have been made up of various classes, including the upper class.<sup>153</sup>

On this basis, when estimating how far Judaism and Christianity had spread in the first century, one would have to admit that it is not only difficult because of the lack of sources but has the limitations which affect all inferences from indirect sources.

Philo and Josephus, as mentioned above, describe numerous gentiles throughout history adopting and becoming devoted to Judaism and write of the Jewish custom of Sabbath observance spreading to all cities and nations.<sup>154</sup> For all the obvious exaggeration of these boasts, they must reflect some measure of the conditions in the city of Rome in the first century BC and the first century AD.

In particular, not only the statement of Josephus on the existence of God-fearers in Europe and Asia, but also the Philo's reproach to the people who prefer "ethical" circumcision and shun physical circumcision, add some degree of reliability to these claims.<sup>155</sup>

The Scripture mentions that there were many Greeks who believed in Jesus or at least followed the teaching of Paul: Acts17:4- "...τῶν τε σεβομένων ἑλλήνων πλῆθος πολὺ γυναικῶν τε τῶν πρώτων οὐκ ἴσχυαι" (a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women); Acts17:12- "...τῶν ἐσχημένων καὶ ἑνδρῶν οὐκ ἴσχυαι" (a number of prominent Greek women).

When Tiberius Julius Alexander (46-48 AD) ruled as proconsul of Judea, Helena, the queen mother, and Izates, the king of Adiabene, on the other side of the river

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<sup>152</sup> E.A. Judge, "Athens and Jerusalem, Past, Present and Future," *Ancient World Studies in Australia*, (1990), 94.

<sup>153</sup> E.A. Judge, "The Early Christians as a Scholastic Community," Part II, *Journal of Religious History Vol.1.3*, (1960), 128-36.

<sup>154</sup> See. 3.2.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

Tigris, converted to Judaism. Izates, despite the opposition of the rest of the royal family and his anxiety for the safety of his status and his country, was circumcised according to the regulations imposed on the proselytes.<sup>156</sup> To the family's relief, this jeopardized neither his position nor that of his country; to this Josephus adds his religious interpretation that the decision of Izates to be circumcised rather stabilized the national life and brought peace.<sup>157</sup> As we can see also, it seems that the Roman state had no sanctions against the conversion of non-Romans either at the time or afterwards.

Was there then any religious concern in the case of these Romans citizens or following their conversion to Judaism? Was there any ordinance forbidding Roman involvement in any of the religions of the Empire's subject nations? How did the Roman state cope with citizens who had affiliated with the religion around them, Judaism in particular? If there was no ordinance, were there any habitual sanctions against them? Was any difference made between dealing with the converts among ordinary Roman citizens and dealing with higher class converts? In other words, was it possible for Roman officers or state officials to accept the religion of a subject nation?

The fraud practised by some Jews on a noble Roman proselyte, Fulvia,<sup>158</sup> in the period of Tiberius (see above) is suggestive. It implies that missionary work was done by Jews to encourage the conversion of gentiles and Romans, whether it was tolerated by the Roman state or was done in secret. Though the incident of the fraud itself resulted in the expulsion of Jews from Rome, the conversions of Roman citizens still continued.

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<sup>156</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XX, 37-41; XX, 44-48.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-53.

<sup>158</sup> See 5.4.3.

Smallwood describes as follows the extent of the spread of Judaism into Roman society and the social influences in the mid-first century:

The episode which had led to the expulsion of the Jews from Rome in 19 ... shows the Roman fear of the infiltration of Judaism into high society ... in this case it was securing a foothold among the imperial family.<sup>159</sup>

Further, he mentions that proselytism in Roman society was not a new phenomenon in the period of Tiberius, but one which had begun in the mid-second century BC.<sup>160</sup>

Josephus writes that Poppaea, Nero's wife, was a God-worshipper and played a role in the pleading on behalf of the Jews.<sup>161</sup> After Festus succeeded as procurator at the death of Felix, probably in AD 59, the king, Agrippa, built a huge chamber in his palace from which he could view everything that went on in the temple. The Jews, enraged at this, erected a high wall to block the view from the chamber. This in turn provoked Festus, for it blocked not only the view from the chamber but also the view from the portico of the outer temple, where the Roman guards had been stationed to supervise the temple; so he ordered its destruction. Twelve envoys, headed by Ishmael, the high priest, were sent to Nero to petition that it should not be destroyed. Their petition was accepted at the appeal of Nero's wife, Poppaea, who was a worshipper of God, and Nero agreed to leave the wall as it was.

What we can infer from this narrative is that it cannot be presumed, though it is difficult to envisage the empress to have been an open adherent of the Jewish religion,

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<sup>159</sup> E. M. Smallwood, *The Jews under Roman Rule*, (1976), 387.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid*, 205.

<sup>161</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities XX*, 195.

that she was the only worshipper of God among the people of high rank and those in Caesar's household. The record of Philippians, which is widely accepted as having been written around AD 61, seems to correspond with this: "All the saints send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household." Phil.4:22, <NIV>

There of course still remains the hermeneutical task of ascertaining who 'Caesar's household' refers to. It is nevertheless clear, irrespective of whether it refers only to Caesar's kin or also to the servants of Caesar that the people surrounding Caesar were under the influence of Jewish sects, Christianity included.

As mentioned, one of the satires of Juvenal also reflects the possible existence of Roman worshippers of the Jewish God, who observe the Jewish dietary laws and of Roman proselytes who obey the Mosaic Law.

Taken together, they all support the view that Judaism made religious approaches towards gentiles and even to Romans, and that among its fruits were God-fearers and proselytes. It therefore would not be wrong to conclude that Judaism was already disseminated throughout the general public and even in the higher ranks of Roman society in the mid-first century.

### **6.3 What would happen to a Roman Centurion who became a 'God-fearer'?**

How would the Roman authorities have reacted to the recognition that a Roman officer was a God-fearer or had fully converted to the Jewish religion?

To the best of my reading of the sources, documents which discuss the conversion of Roman officers to any Jewish religion or their punishment for doing so are very hard to find. Thus, I would have to admit that the inferences in this chapter, must for

this reason be made through indirect sources which let one make assumptions about the context of the time.

First of all, the basic stance of Rome on Judaism can be defined as tolerance. The Jews, because of this, could enjoy numerous religious privileges and Judaism was infiltrated widely into Roman society, to the extent that the Roman Empire observed it with some disquiet.

The two expulsions of the Jews from Rome were due to the Romans' surmise that the increasing numbers of Jewish people and the spread of their religion were among the elements threatening Roman society, but such treatment was limited to the city of Rome; in other regions Jewish traditions were being observed without any restrictions.

It was also considered through the study of several cases that such propagating activities were not totally controlled or restricted by the Roman authorities: the administrative enforcement of the policy towards Judaism varied according to the individual procurators or Emperors.

Some cases, such as that of Poppaea, Nero's wife and a God-worshipper, of Fulvia, a Roman noblewoman, or of other aristocratic women narrated in the Scripture, or exposed in the satire of Juvenal, keep alive the possibility that the Jewish religion may have deeply infiltrated into the upper classes of Roman society.

#### **6.4 Summary and Conclusion**

Being a God-fearer or proselyte was far from strange among non-Jews, and the occasional cases of Roman converts or Roman God-fearers, in the records also show the considerable influx of Judaism into Roman society in the early and middle years of the first century.

Not only the Scripture but also the records of the ancient historians commonly discuss elaborate the vigorous spread of Judaism by the first century and the Jewish population, including early Christian community, represented people of various classes.

On the question whether a Roman officer could convert to the religion of a subject nation or whether there were any restrictions or punishments for Roman proselytes or religious devotees, a definite answer cannot be given, for no record which directly mentions such incidents has survived.

However, some historical records, as mentioned above, which allude to the influx of Judaism into the high ranks of Roman society leave room for the possibility that a Roman centurion could have converted in the political and social context of the time.

## **CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION**

The effort of the Roman Empire to prevent friction with the Jews and to assuage their discontents as a subject nation of the Empire resulted in the bestowal of juridical competence to deal with Jewish religious offenders as well as religious liberty for individuals.

Even in the situation of mandatory Imperial cult throughout the Empire, the Jews could be privileged to exempt themselves: the annual temple tax exacted from ancient times was not prohibited and the temple worship of the Jews was permitted on condition that they sacrificed and prayed for the Emperor, which they agreed to do as an expression of loyalty to him.

Though there were two expulsions of Jews from the city of Rome in AD 19 and 49, it is noticeable that the Roman regulations on Judaism were not strict, if we consider that manumitted Jews, under an edict of Augustus, had religious liberty when they settled in Rome and even came back to Rome soon after the first expulsion. It can thus be inferred that the expulsion decree and censure of the Jews was temporary and not a matter of policy on the part of the authorities.

Moreover, the authorities in the regions were repeatedly instructed to restrain themselves and not to provoke the Jews, in the matter of their religion above all, for

the sake of social order and stability. It was also observed that the missionary activities of the Jews and the conversion of the Roman citizens were not prevented and there was to some extent some growth of Judaism among dignitaries as well as ordinary Roman citizens.

Judging from these, it cannot be said that the conversion narrative of a Roman centurion must have been Luke's invention without historical reliability or that such a conversion would have been impossible in the context of the time. Further, it seems likely that the conversion of a Roman officer, estimated to have been in AD 39, was not seen as a threat to Roman authority and it would not have been totally impossible for Cornelius to follow this minority Jewish religion.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ANRW	<i>Aufstieg und Nierdergang de römischen Welt</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JJS	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
JRS	<i>Journal of Roman Studies</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
NICNT	<i>New International Commentary on the New Testament</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
TAPA	<i>Transactions of the American Philological Association</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>

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