

Paths of Early Christian Mission into Rome: Judaean-Christians in the Households of Pagan Masters

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Christianity became established in Rome in the 40s of the first century, initially in one or more of the synagogues. The Christian message kindled unrest among the Roman Jews, causing Claudius to expel from the city the main propagators of this internal Jewish quarrel.¹

The paths that led Christianity into the Roman synagogues have not yet been discovered. However, piecing together the mosaic stones of different sources reveals a model for finding a solution.

First Clement (63.3; 65.1) mentions a Roman Christian named Valerius Biton. The elderly man was part of the Roman delegation that carried the *First Letter of Clement* to Corinth, thus endorsing the letter with his personal presence. Described as an old man in the 90s of the first century, Valerius Biton must have been born in the 30s or 40s. He experienced the beginnings of Christianity in Rome as a child. His name identifies him as a freedman or the son of a freedman of the *gens Valeria*.

A pagan Latin epigraph from Rome in the first century C.E. provides us with the second piece of the mosaic.² This grave inscription lists freedpersons of the *gens Valeria*, including a Valeria Maria. In this case, “Maria” is clearly a

1. Acts 18:2; Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus, *On the Lives of the Caesars: Claudius* 25.4; Orosius, *History Against the Pagans* 7.6.15-16; cf. Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Roman History* 60.6.6-7; cf., e.g., Peter Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen in den ersten beiden Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989), 4-8. The discussion of “Claudius’ edict” does not need to be re-examined here.

2. *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum* [CIL], Vol. 6 (ed. G. Henzen, et al.; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), 27948.

cognomen, not a *gentilicium*.³ The use of the *cognomen* “Maria” seldom occurs in *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum* VI. Usually “Maria,” like “Marius,” indicates the *gens* *Maria* in the Latin inscriptions of the city of Rome. The *cognomen* “Maria” can be found only seven times in *CIL* VI.⁴ However, it clearly represents the Semitic name, so that in all probability our Valeria Maria of the first century C.E. was Jewish or Jewish-Christian.

The inscription identifies Valeria Maria as a freedwoman of a certain Lucius Valerius Diogenes.⁵ Diogenes was the heir of a Lucius Valerius Hiero, and Hiero in turn was the heir of a Lucius Valerius Papia. If Valeria Maria died in the 90s of the first century C.E. at the latest, then the dates of death for Diogenes, for Hiero and for Papia can be extrapolated at the latest for the 80s, 50s, and 20s respectively. This shows that, in any case, Lucius Valerius Papia was born in the first century B.C.E.

A first-century B.C.E. Senator Lucius Valerius, who was friendly to the Jews, is described by Flavius Josephus in *Antiquities* 14.8.5. In 47 B.C.E., the *praetor urbanus* Lucius Valerius, son of a Lucius Valerius, moved to renew the friendship and alliance with the Jewish people while leading a Senate meeting. He also moved to send letters to “the free cities and kings” within the realm of Roman influence in order to secure unhindered access for the Jews to harbors and other public areas. Prior to this, Lucius Valerius had received a three-member Jewish delegation asking for these privileges. The Senate approved Lucius Valerius’ motion.⁶

3. Editor’s note: According to ancient Roman naming conventions, men’s names “typically contain three proper nouns which are classified as *praenomen* (or given name), *nomen* (or Gens name [= *gentilicium*]) and *cognomen*.” The *praenomen* is used for friendly, informal address; the *nomen gentilicium* is one’s clan name; the third name, one’s *cognomen*, typically inherited from father to son, was used “to distinguish a family within a *Gens*. Often the *cognomen* was chosen based on some physical or personality trait.” (Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger, founders, “Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia,” n.p. [cited 15 December 2003]. Online: http://en2.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_naming_convention.)

4. *CIL* VI:14025; 27948; 12907; probably also 11175; 19039; 13717; 10881. In contrast, the *gentilicium* “Maria” occurs about 108 times in *CIL* VI.

5. The epigraph presents two groups of freedpersons who were given a burial place by their patrons. Both of these patrons, Lucius Valerius Amphion and Lucius Valerius Diogenes, had inherited the place from a man named Lucius Valerius Hiero (probably their father). In the epigraph, Amphion is named first before Diogenes. Therefore, one can assume that the first group of freedpersons was dependent on Amphion, while the second, which included our Maria, was dependent on Diogenes. Significantly, in the second group, one of the freedmen again carried the name Diogenes.

6. It is possible to connect this *Senatus consultum* with 1 Maccabees (15:15-24; 12:16-17; 14:22-24) and, contrary to Josephus, to date it in the 130s B.C.E. (See, e.g., T. R. S. Broughton, *The Magistrates of the Roman Republic*, Vol. 1 [New York: Oxford University Press, 1951], 491-92.) But much debate surrounds this issue. According to both texts, a golden shield was brought by the

It is plausible that there is some connection between the Senator Lucius Valerius, who demonstrated a friendly attitude toward the Jews, and the *familia* of the Jewish Maria, who was a freed slave of a Lucius Valerius Diogenes. However, new epigraphical material would be necessary before we could determine the nature of this connection. In any case, our Jewish Maria and the Senator Lucius, friendly to the Jews, belonged to the same *gens* or “clan.”

The Roman rhetorician, Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, is another probable patron of Valerian Jewish freed slaves. The son of a consul, Valerius Messalla was born circa 64 B.C.E. After residing in Greece, Macedonia, Asia Minor and Alexandria,⁷ he put in a good word in Rome for Herod the Great in the year 40 B.C.E.⁸ Valerius Messalla became governor of Syria around 28 B.C.E. There, he disbanded a gang of gladiators outside of Antioch.⁹ Together with Marcus Agrippa, Valerius Messalla received the house of Mark Anthony on the Palatine as a gift of honor in 29 B.C.E.¹⁰

Like Valerius Messalla, Marcus Agrippa was politically active in the eastern Empire; he was general governor of the eastern provinces toward the end of the 20s B.C.E. In 17 B.C.E., he again set off for the east. A close friend of Herod the Great, he is described as friendly toward the Jews.¹¹ Marcus Agrippa's household in the city of Rome included Jewish slaves and freedpersons. In the first century C.E., they formed the Synagogue of the *Agrippesioi*, for which we have epigraphical evidence.¹² There is no other patron in sight for this Jewish synagogue besides Marcus Agrippa himself.

Jewish delegation. Both texts mention renewed friendship and the writing of letters of protection. In both cases, a Numenius, son of Antiochus, was part of the Jewish delegation, and a senator Lucius set the tone. And in both cases, a “son of Jason” was the second delegate, although he was named Antipater in 1 Maccabees while Josephus names him Alexander. (Josephus also differs from 1 Maccabees in that he knows the name of a third delegate.) If, according to the context of 1 Macc 15, Josephus' *Senatus consultum* were to be dated in the 130s B.C.E., and if Josephus consequently made a mistake in the dating of his source material, then our senator Lucius Valerius was identical with the consul of the year 131 B.C.E., Lucius Valerius Flaccus. The latter became consul as *flamen Martialis* and probably belonged to the circle around the Gracchi (cf. Alan E. Astin, *Scipio Aemilianus* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1967], 192, n. 3). Consequently, our Lucius Valerius who was friendly to the Jews would not have been from the first century B.C.E. but even earlier, from the second half of the second century B.C.E.

7. Cf. Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 12, 32.2; Appian, *Civil Wars* 4.159-160; Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Roman History* 47.33.1-2; Plutarch, *Brutus* 40.41; Velleius Paterculus 2.71.1.

8. Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.14.4; *Jewish Wars* 1.284; see also 1.243.

9. Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Roman History* 51.7.7; Albius Tibullus, *Elegies* 1.3.1.

10. Cassius Dio Cocceianus, *Roman History* 53.27.5.

11. Josephus, *Antiquities* 14.14.4; *Jewish Wars* 1.284; see also 1.243.

12. *Corpus inscriptionum graecarum* [CIG] 9907; *Corpus inscriptionum judaicarum* [CIJ]

I:503; 425; 365.

“Volumnius” was the *nomen gentile* of a Roman legate who resided in Syria in 8 B.C.E. and whose friendship was enjoyed by Herod the Great.¹³ This Volumnius is the most probable patron of the Jewish slaves and freedpersons who founded the Synagogue of the *Volumnenses* (first century C.E.) in the city of Rome.¹⁴

From these data we can conclude that at least two, if not three, Roman patrons can be named who lived for some time in the eastern Empire, including Syria, maintained friendly relations with Herod the Great, and included Jewish freedpersons and slaves in their households in Rome. In at least two cases it can be proven that these *liberti* and *servi* formed their own respective synagogues and had no compunction about naming them after their pagan patrons (“*Agrippesioi*,” “*Volumnenses*”).

After all this material, it is no surprise that a Synagogue of the (*He*)*rodioi* also can be verified in the city of Rome.¹⁵ Even if this inscription does not come from the first century C.E., considering its name, we cannot exclude the possibility that this Jewish congregation originated in the time of Augustus. Here we have at least the possibility that Jewish slaves and freedpersons of the Herodian royal household also had a synagogue of their own in Rome.

In the first century C.E., freedpersons of the imperial household formed the Synagogue of the *Augustesioi* in Rome.¹⁶

Contemporaneously, there was the Synagogue of the *Vernaculi* in the city of Rome.¹⁷ The meaning of this name, however, is ambiguous: either “house slaves, slaves born in the house” gathered together in this synagogue; or “native, Roman” Jews (as opposed to Jewish immigrants) met here.

Not only Jewish freedpersons and slaves of pagan households formed their own synagogues; also Christian *liberti* and *servi* of non-Christian masters organized house congregations of their own. In Romans 16, Paul sent greetings to various congregations in Rome, among others to:

- “Those who are part of Aristobulus’ domestic staff” (16:10);
- “Those in the Lord who are part of Narcissus’ domestic staff” (16:10);
- The house church of Prisca and Aquila (16:3-5);

13. Josephus, *Jewish Wars* 1.27.1-3 (535-536, 538, 542); *Antiquities* 16.9.1-3 (277ff); 16.10.7 (332); 16.10.8 (335ff); 16.10.9 (351, 354).

14. *CIL* VI:29756; *CIJ* I:343; 402; 417; 523.

15. *CIJ* I:173.

16. *CIL* VI:29757; *CIG* 9902-3; *CIJ* I:284; 301; 338; 368; 416; 496. Phil 4:22 shows that there were Christians within the imperial household in the middle of the first century C.E., at least in the east.

17. *CIJ* I:318; 383; 398; 494.

- The Christians who were together with Asyncritus, Phlegon, Patrobas and Hermes (16:14); and
- The saints who were with Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas (16:15).

If we assume that the fourteen other persons greeted in the chapter did not belong to any of the five crystallization points mentioned — and they hardly belonged to only one further group — then it follows that, in the 50s of the first century C.E., at least seven different Christian islands existed in the capital of the Empire. There are no signs of a central meeting place for the Christian circles scattered throughout the city, neither at this time nor in the later decades of the first two centuries C.E.¹⁸ Each group must have celebrated its own worship services somewhere in an apartment, workshop, or private house. Thus, these circles can be called house churches.

Two points are clear for the two Christian circles in the households of Aristobulus and of Narcissus: (a) Neither patron was a Christian himself, otherwise Paul would have included him in the greeting; and (b) Not all freedpersons and slaves in the two households were Christian, otherwise Paul would have formulated the greeting more simply to “Aristobulus’ domestic staff” and to “Narcissus’ domestic staff.”

Aristobulus’ name was not common in Rome.¹⁹ He had probably immigrated to Rome from the east (together with his Christian slaves?). Another possibility is that he himself actually lived in the east, and kept only part of his household in Rome. The name “Aristobulus” was favored by the Herodian family, which fits with the above data but is not in itself conclusive.

Not only Jewish or Christian slaves and/or freedpersons but also pagan servants of a household could form an independent religious unity within their *oikos*. In pagan houses and estates, *collegia* of slaves administered the cult of the Lares or the cult of the genius of their master. The slaves themselves held the honorary and priestly positions in these cult communities.²⁰ Cornelius Tacitus knew of Roman households in which the servants practiced a religion different from that of their masters.²¹ At the beginning of the fourth century, pagan slaves were worshiping their own idols, even in the homes of Christian masters.²²

18. Cf. Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 301-45.

19. The masculine form occurs only twice in *CIL VI*, in 17577 and 29104.

20. See Lampe, *Die stadtrömischen Christen*, 319.

21. Cornelius Tacitus, *Annals* 14.44.3.

22. Canon 41 of the Synod of Elvira. For a pagan slave in a Christian home, see Onesimus. In the first century C.E., he followed paganism until his conversion by Paul (Phlm 10-11). It is not clear, however, in which form he practiced his pagan religion — whether together with other

The material gathered here demonstrates at least four points:

1. Synagogal and Christian congregations could sometimes define themselves within the limits of the *oikos* in which their members lived and worked as slaves or freedpersons. The primary scene of work and living and the place of religious activity were two concentric circles.
2. The women or men who were patrons of the households in question practiced a religion different from that of their servants.²³ In these cases, the synagogal and Christian house communities were organized by the initiative of the house servants but were tolerated by the pagan masters and mistresses of the household.
3. The fragmentary evidence names some owners and patrons of Jewish-Christian slaves and freedpersons in the city of Rome. Some of these patrons had worked for a while in the Syrian east and kept up contact with Herod (Agrippa, Volumnius, cf. Valerius). In two other cases (the *Herodioi* and Aristobulus' people), a proximity to the Herodian royal household appears at least possible.
4. A co-existence of Jewish and Christian slaves and freedpersons can be proven at least in the *gens Valeria* and in the Emperor's household.

It is very tempting to assume that the Christian Valerius Biton, already elderly at the end of the first century C.E. (1 *Clement* 63.3; 65.1), came into contact with the Christian proclamation through Valerian Jewish-Christian freedpersons. Perhaps the Jewish or Jewish-Christian Valeria Maria was even his mother or another close relative. New epigraphical material would be needed, however, to be able to substantiate such a hypothesis. Nevertheless, we can cautiously formulate at least one generalization: it was through the aforementioned Roman households — in particular, through their Jewish *servi* and *liberti* and their descendants — that Jewish-Christianity found one of its ways into the city of Rome from the Syrian-Palestinian east in the 40s of the first century C.E.

pagan slaves in Philemon's house or outside of it. For Christian slaves in pagan houses see also 1 Tim 6:1; Tit 2:9-10; Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.55.

23. This is true for nearly all households mentioned by name in the foregoing discussion. The *Herodioi* comprise the only exception.