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## Miscellanea

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## Miscellanea

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### Some Notes for a Lecture on Judaism and Early Christianity in the Roman State, with Special Reference to the Book of Acts

In the two-volume work of Luke-Acts the author tells a story which moves almost entirely among the people of the Jews within and outside of Palestine, a nation which at that time was a part of the world empire of Rome. It is natural that the Christian movement came into close contact, sometimes into violent conflict, with the Jewish environment from which it grew. It was also to be expected that clashes would arise between the Roman government, on the one hand, and the conquered Jewish people, on the other, including in the latter the early Christians, considered by the Romans either as a Jewish sect or, especially later, as a dissenting religious group separate from the Jews.

The position occupied by Judaism and early Christianity in the Roman world and the attitude of the Roman state toward them is therefore not only an interesting study, but also an important factor for the understanding of the writings of St. Luke, especially of the Book of Acts, with which we are here particularly concerned.

We shall here remark on—

- I. The historical background;
- II. The passages in Acts in which Judaism and Christianity come into contact with the Roman state;
- III. General conclusions drawn from these incidents on the background of secular history.

#### I

The beginning of the Jewish state of the New Testament goes back to the heroic rising of the Jews under the sons of Mattathias against Antiochus Epiphanes. After the death of Mattathias in 161 B. C., Judas Maccabaeus, appointed by the father to be the leader among his five sons, made an offensive and defensive alliance with the Roman republic, which was becoming a power in Syrian politics. This might be considered the beginning of the relationship of Rome with Jerusalem, at first helpful, but later fateful to the latter.

The attitude of the republic at that time toward non-Roman religions was one of toleration, except when "a strange religion was dangerous to public morality or social order or political security, or when the foreign religions did not reciprocate the state toleration with an equal toleration of their own."<sup>1</sup>

It is certain that there were Jews in Rome under the republic. They at times wielded considerable power and exercised sufficient influence to be reckoned with at the time of elections. In 139 B. C.

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<sup>1</sup> Hardy, *Christianity and the Roman Government*, p. 13.

they were expelled from Rome and from Italy, but before long they returned. Cicero called their religion a *barbara superstitio* and thought that Flaccus was right in not allowing the annual temple tax to be sent by the Jews of Asia to Jerusalem.

*Julius Caesar* (100—44 B. C.) followed a more favorable policy toward the Jews, partly on general principles of his own, partly to reward Antipater, the father of Herod, for valuable services rendered in the war against Egypt.

*Octavianus Augustus* (27 B. C.—14 A. D.), reconstructing the Eastern provinces in 31 B. C., allowed Herod to remain king, even becoming quite friendly with him. This Herod, known as Herod I, also called the Great, fostered Hellenistic culture and sought the favor of Rome, while he endeavored to make the Jews believe that he was one of them and sympathetic with their aims. He rebuilt and renamed Caesarea, but also spent large sums in beautifying the Temple in Jerusalem.

Following his policy of not disturbing the customs and traditions of conquered nations any more than necessary, Augustus exempted the Jews from military service. They were also exempted from emperor worship, but took the oath of allegiance to Rome and the emperor. While they would not sacrifice to the emperor, they did sacrifice for him and prayed for him in their synagogues.

When *Herod I* died in 4 B. C., a little while after Christ had been born, Augustus carried out his last will and testament in the main:

*Archelaus* received Judea, Idumea, and Samaria and ruled 4 B. C. to 6 A. D. Being a disappointment to the Roman government, he was deposed and succeeded by Roman procurators, whose seat of government was at Caesarea rather than at Jerusalem, which would have been more irksome to the Jews.

*Herod Antipas*, another son of Herod I, 4 B. C.—39 A. D., received Galilee and Perea, which was prosperous under him. He built the city of Tiberias in Greek style. Although he was a friend of the Romans, he took pains to attend the Jewish festivals at Jerusalem. His reign ended in banishment, to which his wife Herodias followed him. This is the Herod most frequently mentioned in the Gospels (Mark 6:17; 8:15; Luke 3:1; 9:7; 13:31) and in the Acts (4:27; 13:1). He imprisoned John the Baptist, and he became a friend of Pilate when Jesus was sent to him for examination, Luke 23:7.

*Herod Philip*, 4 B. C.—34 A. D., received the country northeast of the Sea of Galilee and built Caesarea Philippi. He was the best of Herod's sons and was married to Salome, daughter of Herodias. These three sons of Herod I bore the title of tetrarch instead of king.

In order to complete the list of Herods who appear in the New Testament, we must mention:

*Herod Agrippa I*, 37—44 A. D., grandson of Herod I, who again assumed the title of king and whose realm gradually became

co-extensive with that of his grandfather. Agrippa I is the Herod who slew James and died a horrible death according to Acts 12.

His son, *Herod Agrippa II*, 49—ca. 100 A. D., was even more friendly to the Jews than his father. Before him and his sister Bernice, Paul was brought by Festus, Acts 26.

Continuing the line of Roman emperors with whom we are concerned in this paper, we find that:

*Tiberias*, 14—37 A. D., continued the policies of Augustus.

*Caius Caligula*, 37—41, however, came into conflict with the Jews because he ordered them to worship the emperor just like other conquered peoples of the empire. This brought about riots among the Jews in Alexandria and would have resulted in a serious uprising in Jerusalem, had not Petronius delayed the execution of the emperor's decree to place his statue in the Temple, during which delay Caligula was assassinated.

His successor *Claudius*, 41—54, was the emperor who returned the kingdom of Herod I to Agrippa I. The untimely death of Claudius, probably at the hand of his wife Agrippina, ruined the hopes for peaceful relations between the Jews and the Romans. After the death of Agrippa I, in 44, Judea was again a province under Roman procurators, among whom Felix was a bad appointment.

*Nero*, 54—68, son of Agrippina, continued Felix in office until he was relieved by Festus. The blame for the great fire in Rome was put by Nero on the Christians, probably at the instigation of the Jews, which brought about the first persecution of the Christians.

## II

Upon this historical background we examine the passages in the Book of Acts in which Judaism and early Christianity come into contact and conflict with the Roman government.

In Acts 4 Peter heals a lame man and preaches a sermon to the assembled people, when "the people, the captain of the Temple, and the Sadducees came upon them" because they "preached through Jesus the resurrection of the dead." Peter defended himself the next day, proclaiming the name of Jesus as the only source of salvation. This time he and John were released with a warning not to teach in this name and with further threatenings.—The *σφατηγός* τοῦ ἱεροῦ, mentioned among priests and Sadducees as coming upon the Apostles, was known in Jewish writings as "the man of the Temple Mount," under whom were the *σφατηγοί*, captains of the Temple police. The *σφατηγός* was a priest, second in dignity to the high priest.<sup>2</sup> This, then, was the same leadership which had crucified Jesus, and the Apostles learned the truth of Jesus' words "The disciple is not above his master nor the servant above his lord," Matt. 10:24.—While in this instance the Roman government did not come into play, it is an example of the functioning of the local Jewish leaders.

<sup>2</sup> *Expositor's Greek New Testament*, for Acts 4:1.

We have a similar case in Acts 5. After the death of Ananias and Sapphira, signs and wonders were wrought by the Apostles, especially by Peter. Then the high priest and those of the Sadducees put the Apostles in prison. But an angel of the Lord brings them forth. Gamaliel gives his famous advice, to which the council agreed. Here we find the interesting note that the Apostles were *beaten* before they were released with a warning, throwing a sidelight on this prerogative which the Jews had or which they assumed.

Coming to the stoning of Stephen, chaps. 6—7, we have a case of mob rule. According to the Talmud the stoning was done in the following manner: The condemned person was stripped to the waist and was pushed off a two-story-high elevation by one of the witnesses. If he still lived, the other witness would throw a large stone on his heart. If this was not fatal, the whole assembly would throw stones until the man was dead.<sup>3</sup> "The stoning of Stephen was no doubt an illegal murder, and other deaths of Christians would come under that head."<sup>4</sup> From this incident we may conclude that the Romans were often powerless to keep the Jews in the bounds prescribed by their conquerors or that they would wink at illegal actions in order to keep the peace.

In chapter 12 we hear of Herod Agrippa I executing James. Nothing is related of a trial and sentence. Even though dependent on Rome for his power, he seems to have had absolute authority over the life and death of his subjects.

During Paul's first journey (cf. Acts 14), when he was at Lystra, the Jews came from Antioch and Iconium and persuaded the people and, having stoned Paul, drew him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. What happened there was done without regard to Roman law.

On Paul's second journey the magistrates at Philippi (στρατηγοί, here Roman officials, called *praetores* in Latin)<sup>5</sup> rent off the clothes of Paul and Silas and commanded to beat them with many stripes and cast them in prison, Acts 16. After the earthquake Paul asked for an apology for being beaten openly, uncondemned, and as Romans.

During the same journey the Jews at Thessalonica caused an uproar with the help of the scum of the city and, not finding Paul and his companions, brought their host and certain brethren unto the rulers of the city, Acts 17. Πολιτάρχας, here used for "rulers," is an "excellent instance of the accuracy of St. Luke, a word found on an arch in modern Saloniki, which also contains the names of some of Paul's converts: Sosipater, Gaius, and Secundus."<sup>6</sup> But when they had taken security of Jason and of the others, they let

<sup>3</sup> Zeller, *Biblisches Woerterbuch*.

<sup>4</sup> A. J. Maclean in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*.

<sup>5</sup> *Expositor's Greek New Testament*, for Acts 16:19 f.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, for Acts 17:6.

them go, i. e., they demanded a pecuniary surety for good behavior, that nothing illegal should be done by them.<sup>7</sup>

The most admirable Roman official in Acts is Gallio, chapter 18. Ἀνθυπατεύωντος is derived from ἀνθ-υπατος, another example of Luke's exactness, since Achaia from 27 B. C. had a proconsul.<sup>8</sup> Gallio refused to entertain the suit of the Jews against Paul because their grievances concerned matters of religious belief. He had some idea of the separation of Church and State.

In the description of the third journey of Paul we have the Ephesian riot. The multitude was finally quieted by the town clerk (γραμματεὺς, Goodspeed: "recorder"), the secretary of the city, the most influential person in Ephesus. The riot ends when the people listen to reason and disband, thanks to the common sense of the γραμματεὺς. He also stands high in our estimation.

We now come to the final riot and subsequent imprisonment of Paul, which ended in Rome — Acts 21:18 ff. Paul is accused of bringing some Greeks into the Temple, of which he was innocent. The Jews work themselves into a frenzy about the unfounded rumor. Claudius Lysias, the chief captain, χιλίαρχος τῆς σπειρης, (Goodspeed: "colonel of the regiment"), rescues Paul and permits him to speak. At his mention of the Gentiles the riot begins anew. Paul saves himself from scourging for examination at the hands of the Romans by pleading his Roman citizenship. To circumvent a conspiracy by more than forty Jews to take Paul by force, he is conducted by a bodyguard of 470 soldiers to Felix in Caesarea. This strong precautionary measure speaks well for the Roman Claudius Lysias. Paul's preaching makes Felix and his wife Drusilla tremble, chap. 24:25; but Paul is kept in prison because the governor expects a bribe. Festus becomes the successor of Felix, and Paul appeals to Caesar.

Why did Claudius Lysias take Paul into custody? There are three explanations: (1) Paul came before him by accident. Had the Jews not started a riot, they might have arrested, tried, and sentenced Paul without the knowledge or concern of the χιλίαρχος. (2) The Jews intended to try Paul only to formulate their case, as they had done with Jesus, and then present their accusation to the chief captain. (3) Claudius Lysias may have intended to keep Paul in custody only while a description of the trial and a suggested verdict was sent to the emperor and an answer received.<sup>9</sup> Paul's appeal changed all this and according to his wishes he was sent to Caesar's court.

Against the decisions of both governors and kings there lay an appeal to the emperor, either from the Sanhedrin to the Roman tribunal or from Festus to Caesar, most probably the latter. The appeal need not necessarily be granted, but once granted, the

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Op. cit.*, for Acts 18:12 and Hastings, *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*.

<sup>9</sup> Cadbury, *Roman Law and the Trial of Paul*.

prisoner could not be released, as we see from the remark of Agrippa in chapter 26:32. It seems that Festus wanted Paul judged according to Jewish law, but in his presence.

Some believe that an appeal to Caesar was a privilege of Roman citizens only. But others doubt this. In Paul's appeal his citizenship is not mentioned. In the time of Claudius and Nero appeals were apparently heard by the emperor in person.

There is fair reason for the conjecture that Luke means to say that the case against Paul came to nothing in Rome, owing to the continued absence of the persecuting Jews, and that after two years he was released.<sup>10</sup>

Paul may have foreseen this and for this reason, and because it gave him an opportunity to get to the western part of the empire, made his appeal.

### III

From the historical background in Part I and from the sketching of the incidents from Acts found above, we may draw a few general conclusions.

It is interesting to note that Harnack accepts these incidents in the Book of Acts as having occurred as Luke relates them, without shading them for politico-apologetic purposes. He says:

Auch eine besondere politisch-apologetische Tendenz hat man ihm (Lukas) mit Unrecht beigelegt. Wie sich das Wort in seiner Widmung auf einen bereits christlich belehrten Mann richtet, so fehlen auch alle Hinweise darauf, dass Lukas sich Heiden als Leser gedacht hat. Er braucht sie nicht ausgeschlossen haben, aber sie schwebten ihm nicht vor. Wenn er trotzdem so viel Gewicht darauf gelegt hat zu zeigen, dass das Evangelium Obrigkeiten, Statthaltern und Koenigen zu Gehoer gekommen ist und dass diese sich im ganzen nicht unfreundlich gestellt haben, so bedarf diese Tatsache nicht der Erklaerung, dass eine supponierte politische Absicht spezieller Art vorliegt. Fuer jede neue religioese Bewegung wird es sehr rasch zu einer Frage des hoechsten Interesses, wie sich die Oeffentlichkeit zu ihr stellt, und die Oeffentlichkeit ist in erster Linie durch die Obrigkeit repraesentiert. Hier kam aber noch ein besonderes Interesse hinzu, welches das Verhalten der roemischen Obrigkeit im Kontrast zur juedischen bieten musste. Was Lukas in dieser Hinsicht erzaehlt, entspricht einfach den Tatsachen, und wenn er, mit Pilatus anfangend, feindseliges Verhalten der roemischen Obrigkeit fuer weit entschuldbarer haelt als das der juedischen, so vermochte doch kein Christ anders urteilen. Uebrigens hat er Unfreundlichkeiten und Feindseligkeiten der roemischen und staedtischen Polizei und den Spott der griechischen Philosophen so wenig unterdrueckt, wie er umgekehrt freundliches Verhalten der Juden nicht verschwiegen hat.<sup>11</sup>

Judaism was *religio licita*, Christianity as such was *illicita*. Some scholars, especially German, believe that Trajan was the

<sup>10</sup> Profs. Lake and Ramsay in *Theol. Tijdschrift*, XLVII (1913), p. 356 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Harnack, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Einleitung, pp. 12—13.

first real persecutor of the Christians and that before his time Christianity was confused with Judaism and that Nero and Domitian were merely capricious persecutors of individuals. Lightfoot dissents from this view. No doubt, Christians were first considered Jews. The heathen accusers of Paul and Silas at Philippi say to the magistrates: "These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city," Acts 16:20. Gallio also considered them some sect of the Jews. Paul's favorable view of the empire organization also would not have brought him into conflict with the Roman authorities. But since Nero, Christianity was considered a distinct sect.

Tacitus writes of "those whom the common people call Christians" (*Annals*, XV). Suetonius, a few years younger than Tacitus, calls Christianity "a novel and malignant superstition." At Domitian's time the distinction between Jews and Christians is apparent, and gradually the confusion between them ceases.

During Trajan's reign Christianity was regarded *per se* unlawful. In his letter to Pliny the Emperor says that Christians are not to be sought out, but that, if accused and convicted, they are to be punished, though not if they apostatize. The law condemned secret societies, and this was perhaps the chief cause for Trajan's attitude toward Christianity. The meetings of the Christians for the Eucharist and the agape would at once rouse antagonism. Christianity was therefore unpopular not only on religious but also on social grounds, because Christians taught the end of the world and the coming of Christ and refused to join in religious festivals and amusements in the theater, by which, as Mommsen says, the hatred of the masses was transferred from the Jews to the Christians ("der Hass der Massen sich von den Juden auf die Christen uebertrug").

We might summarize in the words of E. G. Hardy:

So far, therefore, as the New Testament narrative carries us, we find that Christian communities had been founded in most of the centers of civilization in the East and in the principal towns of Macedonia and Achaia; that, starting from a Jewish nucleus, they had in most cases, in the course of a few years, a preponderance of heathen converts; that the Jews looked on them with the bitterest animosity, persecuted them as far as they had the means, and lost no opportunity of appealing to the Roman government against them; that the Roman officials were rather inclined to protect them as an extreme sect of the Jews, but of necessity realizing by degrees, both from the hostility of the Jews and from the increasing prevalence of the Greek nickname *χριστιανοί*, that it was rather a new religion than an extreme sect; that the heathen population, while listening not altogether without interest to the religious teaching of the Christian missionaries, came in the course of time to be suspicious of Christianity on social and commercial grounds; and that, finally, this suspicion, fomented probably by Jewish malevolence, hardened little by little into bitter hatred, of which we have abundant evidence in the second century."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> E. G. Hardy, *op. cit.*, p. 40.



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