

LEARNING TO LOVE THAT LONG LIST OF NAMES IN ROMANS 16

Introduction

Some time about AD57 Paul stopped in Corinth. His travels would take him nearly ten thousand miles along routes busy with “government officials, traders, pilgrims, the sick, letter-carriers, sightseers, runaway slaves, fugitive prisoners, athletes, artisans, preachers and students.”ⁱ People travelled more extensively than anyone before them or would until the 19th century. From the Roman colony of Corinth he wrote to the church in Rome, a bustling city with a population density equivalent to or even higher than any modern slum.ⁱⁱ “Every main street in an ancient city was lined with shops . . . many run by people who had achieved some modest success... These were the bakers, butchers, greengrocers, barbers, fullers, cobblers, auctioneers, moneylenders and inn keepers. They trained their sons and daughters to follow them and were much less reticent about their trades than their social superiors may have thought they should be. In the eyes of the upper classes they were common and servile, but they took pride in their successes and accomplishments, . . . , On their tombstones they boasted of their professions and even their business addresses.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the next century the *Epistle to Diognetus* would boast that Christians were just like other people, they “are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life.”^{iv}

In the closing words of his epistle Paul lists several dozen names. We know frustratingly little about them from the Bible itself, but recent scholars have looked into the sociology of the time and examined the archaeological evidence to reveal the world in which they lived, and in so doing the names suddenly come to life. We shall look at some of this evidence here.

House Churches

Perhaps we should call them household churches as this better reflects how they functioned: not as four walls in which the small congregations met, but family homes with attendant servants, slaves and clients where Christians gathered. P. F. Esler reminds us that “It is essential to note that these households were functioning families, containing family members and possibly slaves and visiting clients, nor just the shells of houses taken over for meetings of the congregation.”^v Their social relationships reflected the times they lived in, within a carefully structured social status pervading their life together and causing more than a few tensions. Rome had many such Christian groups. We know of the group that met in Priscilla and Aquila’s home. There was probably one in the household of Aristobulus and perhaps another in the household of Narcissus. Probably “Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the other brothers and sisters with them” were a church as perhaps were “Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the Lord’s people who are with them.” Peter Oakes has carried out a careful study of housing in Pompeii, trying to imagine the buildings as meeting places for the church. While in Pompeii the cabinet-maker’s property could have housed a sizable gathering of up to forty people, in Rome where the price of housing was higher he would have perhaps only managed half that number.^{vi}

This is not to say that the small groups never met together as a city-wide congregation. As in the case of the cabinet-maker of Pompeii sometimes people of low social status could own relatively large properties.^{vii} Wayne Meeks comments that “Where the Christians were lucky enough to find a convert or sympathizer who could afford a more spacious house, all the cells in a city might come together on occasion for worship and instruction (1 Cor 14:23; Rom 16:23). In time the house might be given, sold, or bequeathed to the Christian community that met there. The earliest building identified by archaeologists, a third century house in the Roman garrison town Dura Europos, is an example, remodelled for exclusive use by Christians long before the town was destroyed. This was a pattern often followed by cults new to a city; the cult of Mithras in Dura had a similar history though longer and more elaborate. So did the Dura synagogue. . . The householder became in effect the patron of the group, offering not only the place and probably some

financial support but also protection. Jason, for example, posts bond to assure the good behavior of his guests in Thessalonica.^{”viii}

Ancient cities were full of funeral clubs, family societies, guilds and small religious sects meeting wherever they could. The authorities were well aware of their presence and tolerated them, except in times of social upheaval when, fearing riots, they were repressed. Sometimes they might have their own building, as in the case of the guilds or schools, as well as the official temples, but as often as not they would hire rooms or meet in a large house. In Rome the poorer Christians were either slaves or lived in the four or five storey *insulae* where families would cram together into small rooms with no sanitation and often no windows. On the ground floor of these *insulae* were shops and workshops which perhaps could welcome a small house church.

Whoever hosted the Christian group would be the patron of the group, a natural leader who would preside over the welfare of the guests who met there for worship and teaching. Could such patrons be women? Osiek *et al* propose that “women participated in all the activities of the house church in the first generations of the Christian era and that the house church was the center for worship, hospitality, patronage, education, communication, social services, evangelization, and mission.”^{ix}

Women in the Church and Ancient World

There is ample evidence that women were patrons of guilds, societies and whole cities. In the middle of the first century Claudia Metrodora from the island of Chios, was a Greek woman who held Roman citizenship. Holding official position in a city or region involved considerable personal expense, and she excelled. She held a sumptuous banquet for the city, undertook the direction of the imperial games, held the office of gymnasiarch four times, and on two occasions, for the festival of the Heraklea games she distributed oil to the whole city. It is recorded that she directed the combined Heraklea Kaisareia and Romania festival on more than one occasion. Best of all she donated the public baths. No wonder she twice held the highest office of *stephanophoros* (*lit. garland wearer*). She had inherited wealth from her adoptive father and was married.^x At the same time Iunia Theodora lived in Corinth but was notable for her political lobbying with the Roman authorities on behalf of her native Lycia. Their ambassadors enjoyed her hospitality when in Corinth and she showed her skills in persuading the government to allow the Lycian exiles to return to their homes after temporary unrest. Again in the same period, Eumachia, daughter of Lucius, public priestess of Pompeian Venus, was honoured by the fullers of Pompeii for her generosity, not least the new portico to their guild hall. The statue erected to her by them survived the eruption and now greets visitors to the British Museum while the remains of the guild’s building still impress visitors to the ruins of Pompeii. She had inherited a considerable fortune from her father, but her business skills amplified her prosperity. Her social status was enhanced by a judicious marriage into the upper class of the city. All three women were honoured by public declarations of gratitude. This was by no means rare. At Herculaneum 40% of dedicatory statues are of women.

Women were attributed more freedom in Roman society than in Greek cities, yet the first century AD shows women appearing in public life more than we might think. Women were beginning to recline at public banquets alongside husbands, opening businesses and administering their own property. There is even evidence of some female members of Greek clubs, although these were usually religious.^{xi} Roman matrons had a high degree of autonomy in households and sometimes rich widows or divorcees would be the head of households. “It was the normal procedure for the person in whose house a group met to dine, to preside, to select the menu and the entertainment that followed the meal, and to facilitate conversation, philosophical or otherwise. The entertainment could take a number of forms, and here an invited expert could be brought in, a philosopher or wisdom figure for the edification of attendees.”^{xii} Yet life was not easy for a woman. They were married young, usually to older men, so were often widowed. Divorce was common in Roman society. Even after she married, she could still continue under the legal power of her father to keep any property in the family. Slave women, of course, were unprotected and vulnerable to sexual assault by their owners, although sometimes they were freed and married their owners.^{xiii} 29% of freedwomen married their own patrons.^{xiv}

And so we find women featuring in the list of names in Romans 16. Phoebe is perhaps the bearer of the letter and Paul is counting on her to pave the way for his planned visits.^{xv} As a deaconess of the church in

Cenchreae she is described as the patron (προστάτις), of the Christian community in the city. Although some commentators have doubted the appropriateness of the word *προστάτις*, preferring an alternative *παραστάτις* meaning ‘helper’ which appears in a few manuscripts, as we have seen a woman patron was by no means a rarity in first century society. The other female names are Prisca, Mary, Junias, Tryphena (meaning ‘dainty’) and Tryphosa (‘delicate’) were almost certainly sisters or maybe even twins, Persis, Rufus’ mother, Julia, Nereus’s sister, Junia could be either male or female but Chrysostom refers to her as a woman.

These are the women and they are very active in the church. Junia is an ‘apostle’. Priscilla is a fellow worker and in the majority of the times she is mentioned in the New Testament her name appears before that of her husband, perhaps because she held higher social status. Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis all work hard in the Lord. If you visited a church group in Rome, Corinth or anywhere else you would have encountered women at work. “Women were present for the principal act of worship, the ritual meal of the assembly, perhaps in background locations in some circumstances but in the foreground in others. They were, after all, half or more of the membership.”^{xvi} Mary the mother of John Mark (Acts 12.12), Lydia (Acts 16:14, 40), Nympha (Col 4:15) and perhaps Chloe (1 Cor 1:11) all hosted church meetings. They would be your hostess and your patron.

Social Status in the Church and the Ancient World.

When we read the New Testament we tend to ignore the question of social status, but this is an error on our part. Social status was hugely important in the First Century. Social mobility was possible but rare. For a woman marriage was a huge social change, but for both sexes in the lower classes the greatest change was from slavery to freedom or vice versa. This did not necessarily define their prosperity. Freedmen and freedwomen could be poor and sometimes slaves were well off. Freedmen and freedwomen would record their change of status on their gravestones (with an ‘L’ after their names), although they still carried the stigma of slavery and would be obligated to their former owners to their deaths. Their children, however, would be born free of any stigma.^{xvii}

And yes, sometimes people sold themselves into slavery. From 1 Clement (written from Rome about AD96) we know that around this time some Roman Christians sold themselves into slavery in order to feed poor fellow Christians. (1 Clem 55:2). The Apostle Paul knew of the practice but would not recommend it: “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.” (1 Cor. 7:23). There could be advantages to slavery: you were exempt from poll tax, you could be trained in a profession, you could be freed later at the age of 30 or 40 or even agree a fixed term.^{xviii}

Slaves were granted their freedom more often than we might imagine. They had to pay for it, of course, but their owners were not averse to taking the money and buying a cheaper, younger slave or two with part of the cash. In any case the freed slaves would still be socially indebted to their ex-owners and could well continue to be involved in the household in some function or other. What strikes one about the list of names in Romans 16 is not just that the majority are Gentiles,^{xix} but that many are slave names. In fact there are more here than would be obvious at first reading. Aristobulus (16:10) may be the grandson of Herod the Great who was a close friend of the Emperor Claudius. When he died, his slaves would have become the property of the emperor, but would still be called “the household of Aristobulus”. A number of them, it seems, had become Christians. The household of Narcissus (16:11) could well refer to the slaves belonging to a very wealthy, freedman, a friend of the Emperor Claudius. When Nero came to the throne, his mother Agrippina forced Narcissus to commit suicide so his slaves would be part of the royal household. As for the rest of the names, the classic study on the slave origin of them was done by Lightfoot in 1894 and was updated in a major study by Peter Lampe in 1991. I have also used the Bible commentaries of Douglas Moo (1996) and especially Robert Jewett (2007).^{xx} Urbanus is a “wish name” usually given to slaves according to Jewett; 3 out of 18 references to the name Stachys are definitely to slaves; most citations of Tryphaina and Tryphosa are to slaves; Asynkritos could be slave or free-born; Phlegon was originally a dog’s name in Greek and 3 of 7 references in antiquity are to slaves; 3 out of 8 references to Patrobus are definitely slaves; likewise, are half of those referring to Philologos; and Nereus was a common slave name after the god of the ocean. Lampe thinks that Junia may well have been a Jewish freed slave or a descendent of a freedman/woman of the Junia family, while Persis is a slave name denoting her Persian origin. Of the Corinthian Christians, Tertius and Quartus (lit. ‘Third’ and ‘Fourth’) are slaves or freedmen, and Erastus is

commonly a slave name. Even given the uncertainties it is obvious that probably half or even more of the names in Romans point to a slave background. MacMullen estimates that in Italia, perhaps 25% of the population were slaves.^{xxi} Estimates of the population of Rome in the first century are around the one million mark.

With that in mind we should try to imagine the carefully defined social strata of the early Christians. Andrew D Clarke reminds us that “theirs was not a 'Christian' world, but they lived within a wider society as a distinct minority,” and that society clearly operated within a framework dominated by distinctions of honour and status. The high offices such as magistrate or priest were largely honorific posts, earned not through skill of training but on the grounds of wealth and social standing. What is rather more unexpected “is that personal influence also operated within other contexts in a similar way, even among the comparatively poorer members of society. The epigraphic and papyrological evidence demonstrates to us, for example, that a similar honour system was at work in the guilds or associations which were often the preserve of slaves or freedmen.”^{xxii}

This network of dependency and favours held society together. J. E. Lendon says “In the Roman world personal influence could be mobilised for the cheap purchase of a farm, for the return of a loan, for a roof over the traveller's head far from home, for a post in the army or even for the capture of a runaway, book-stealing slave; it pervaded the whole sphere of action.”^{xxiii} It tended to work between members of society who held the same social status. Clarke explains “benefactors did not establish client relationships with 'the urban poor'. They were great inferiors.”^{xxiv} To their social peers however they provided loans or gifts in time of need and assistance in financial activities and the recipients were expected to respond with extreme gratitude, attending the morning gathering (*salutatio*) in their patron's reception room. In 2 Thess. 3.8-11 the Apostle Paul advises Christians to be a benefactor and not rely on others to support them. While he found the patron-client relationship distasteful it clearly happened within the church. But there could never be enough benefactors to go round. Later in the first century 1 Clement reveals one of their prayer liturgies to us: “We beseech you, Lord and Master, to be our help and succour. Save those among us who are in tribulation; have mercy on the lowly; lift up the fallen; show yourself to the needy; heal the ungodly; convert the wanderers of your people; feed the hungry; release our prisoners; raise up the weak; comfort the fainthearted.”(1 Clem. 59:4).

Not all were poor, as we have seen, and the well-off would be expected to carry out their civic duties. Romans 13:7 tells us that many in the church paid not just taxes but custom duties also. In that passage as well as in Phil. 1:27 and 1 Peter 2:13-17 the Christians are reminded that they are citizens (*politeia*) of the Empire and should live accordingly. When rich people became Christians they would continue as civic benefactors, ensuring that the city's grain did not run out, that public buildings and areas were well maintained and the games and celebrations which marked the civic calendar were properly funded. They would attend banquets and private parties. In return they would receive public recognition in the form of plaques and papyrus declarations of gratitude in which their good works would be listed. In Rom 13:3 Paul reminds the Christians that they will receive public recognition for their good works (see also 1 Peter 2:14). Bruce Winter points out that Christians were not taught to undertake civic benefactions for pragmatic reasons but rather theological ones,” because honour is really coming from God.^{xxv} Even if Christians faced hostility in so doing “Don't tire in doing what is good” (2 Thess 3:13).

It so happens that our list in Romans 16 contains the name of one prominent Christian for whom that would be very relevant. In v.23 Erastus who is the director of public works in Corinth sends his greetings to the Christians of Rome. The word used is *oikonomos* which can be translated as steward or director, and although clearly a high ranking office it is not an official title as such. To the excitement of everyone in 1929 an inscription was unearthed in Corinth dating from the middle of the first century which reads "Erastus in return for his aedileship paved it at his own expense." Now the term *aedile* is very much an official title. It is a Latin word (Corinth was an official Roman colony) and there is no direct Greek equivalent. *Oikonomos* could well mean aedile. The aedile was elected for one year and was responsible for overseeing the upkeep of the city property, streets, public buildings etc. He was also responsible for the public games. The pavement is definitely from the mid-first century and Erastus was not a particularly common name. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the high-flying, influential Erastus had become a Christian and continued to carry out good works as a good citizen of Corinth and a follower of Jesus Christ. However we cannot be entirely sure.

If, as most scholars believe, the later Epistle to the Philippians was written from Rome, then further light is shed on the social status of some of the Roman Christians. Phil 4:22 says “All the Lord's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household” Since long ago the ordinary wealthy people of Rome had used slaves and freedmen to run their day-to-day business, and the Emperor Augustus and his successors did the same. They created the ‘Familia Caesaris’ to administer much of the official business. They were effectively a civil service and they used their position to climb the social ladder. P.R. Weaver calculates that nearly two thirds of the male members of the Familia Caesaris (including slaves and freedmen) married freeborn wives. For the rest of the equivalent population the figure was only around one in ten. A significant number of these upwardly mobile civil servants had joined the churches in the capital.^{xxvi}

So the church was a microcosm of society and you can be sure that social tension ran deep. The poor would seldom eat meat, and when they did it would have been a free hand-out in a civic festival where it would have been sacrificed to a pagan god first. Should they eat it? And while their consciences bothered them, the benevolent rich members of the church would be dining in style in meals served in pagan temples where civic celebrations were often held. Factions could easily develop in a church as Christians grouped around a particular leader, like clients around a patron. Some claimed to be of Apollos, others of Paul, others of Peter (1 Cor 3: 21). As worshippers crowded into the houses of those who hosted them they would have been well aware of the status of their hosts and be careful to follow social proprieties.

Conclusion

Wayne Meeks comments: “The village culture of Palestine had been left behind and the Greco-Roman city became the dominant environment of the Christian movement.”^{xxvii} Rural communities were always much more conservative than urban ones, and most of those who through good fortune or clever dealing made decent money soon moved away to one of the thriving cities of the empire. There they mixed with people of all kinds of cultural and racial backgrounds, some economic migrants like them, others merchants, others fugitives. These people brought their foreign religious cults with them and organized worship in all kinds of places such as basements, hired halls or homes. Newcomers to the city might join drinking clubs, funeral clubs, guilds for their trade or private clubs with a special interest. The poorer folk were either slaves in their masters’ accommodation or lived on the top floors of the insanitary, crowded, smelly and dangerous *insulae*, from which they would escape out onto the streets at any opportunity, not least to visit the public lavatories. And some of them would hear about a Jewish messiah called Jesus, the Son of God, saviour of the world who had been crucified in Jerusalem and rose on the third day from the dead. They would hear that they themselves could receive his Spirit and be a follower. They would crowd into a house in one of Rome’s suburbs and be greeted on the door by the much travelled Aquila, or maybe his wife Priscilla. Perhaps it would be the impressive Nympha in her house in Laodicea who ushers them over the threshold and whispers that today is special because they have an epistle from the Apostle Paul to read out (Col 4:15,16). How they feel depends largely on their social status. They will be careful how they speak to those who are a class or two above them, but there is such a social mix in that house today that they cannot help but feel that something special is happening and that it is, as the Apostle famously preaches “All are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

Peter James Cousins
Bible Unzipped,
Rhos-on-Sea, November 2019

ⁱ Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) p.27.

ⁱⁱ See Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations 50BC to 270AD* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1974)

ⁱⁱⁱ John Stambaugh, David Balch, *The Social World of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 1986), p.2.

^{iv} *Epistle to Diognetus*, ch.5

-
- ^v P. F. Esler “Imagery and Identity in Gal 5:13-6:10” in H. Moxnes (ed.), *Constructing Early Christian Families: family as social reality and metaphor* (London: Routledge, 1997) p.135.
- ^{vi} Peter Oakes, *Reading Romans in Pompeii* (London: SPCK, 2009), p.79f.
- ^{vii} Carolyn Osiek, Margaret Y. MacDonald, Janet H. Tulloch, *A Women's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), p.9.
- ^{viii} Wayne Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (London:SPCK, 1986) p. 111.
- ^{ix} Osiek *et al*, p.9.
- ^x See R.A. Kearsley, “Women in Public Life in the Roman East: Iunia Theodora, Claudia Metrodora and Phoebe, Benefactress of Paul,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 50.2 (1999) pp. 189-211. This is available free on-line.
- ^{xi} Wayne A. Meeks, *In search of the Early Christians*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002) p.19.
- ^{xii} Osiek *et al*, p.163.
- ^{xiii} Osiek *et al*, p.26
- ^{xiv} P.R.C. Weaver *Familia Caesaris: A Social Study of the Emperor's freedmen and Slaves* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p.193f
- ^{xv} See Robert Jewett, “Paul, Phoebe and the Spanish Mission.” in *The Social World of Formative Christianity: Essays in Tribute of Howard Clark Kee*, ed. Jacob Neusner *et al* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) where he suggests she is the patron of Paul’s trip to Spain. See also Caroline F. Whelan, “Amica Pauli: The Role of Phoebe in the Early Church,” *JSNT* 49 (1993), 84
- ^{xvi} Osiek *et al*, p.12.
- ^{xvii} Hock, p.20.
- ^{xviii} Peter Lampe, *Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. Michael Steinhauser (London: Continuum, 2003) pp.85-87.
- ^{xix} Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 918.
- ^{xx} J.B. Lightfoot, *The Epistles of St. Paul: Philippians* (London:MacMillan 1894) pp.171-178; Peter Lampe, “The Roman Christians of Romans 16”, Karl. P. Donfried (ed.), *The Romans Debate* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 1991) pp. 216-230; Moo, *op.c.it.*; Robert Jewett, *Romans* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,2007) p.50.
- ^{xxi} MacMullen, p. 92.
- ^{xxii} Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) p.7ff.
- ^{xxiii} J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: the Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) p. 30.
- ^{xxiv} Clarke, p.45ff.
- ^{xxv} Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 1994) p.38.
- ^{xxvi} Weaver, p.193.
- ^{xxvii} Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983) p.11.