‘God’s beloved in Rome’ (Rm 1:7).
The genesis and socio-economic situation of the first generation Christian community in Rome*

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ABSTRACT
According to our available sources 48 AD would be a safe terminus ad quem for the arrival of Christianity in Rome. The Christian community in Puteoli may, however, be older. The genesis of Roman Christianity should be ascribed to a ‘spontaneous’ development as well as the pioneering work of part-time Christian missionaries. They drew the bulk of their members from the lower social strata, but belonged economically to the low middle-class, although containing a substantial poorer element, as well as a sprinkling of better-offs. Lampe’s critique of the notion that the Pauline congregations as a whole represented a fair cross-cut of their respective urban societies must be endorsed.

1 INTRODUCTORY REMARKS
The purpose of this article is to present, on the basis of our primary sources and the latest research, and in dialogue with the latter, an overall picture of what we know with relative certainty (that is, at least with a high degree of probability), about the earliest history and socio-economic circumstances of those pioneer Christians to whom Paul addressed his Roman correspondence. The development of such a frame of reference is a necessary prerequisite for the understanding of the book of Romans. It is certainly true that for this purpose we are to an important degree dependent on Paul’s letter to the Romans itself, but as exegetes we all know that the circular movement between text and context, and vice versa, is typical of the hermeneutical process.

Regarding the first Roman Christians, our frame of reference can be likened to a puzzle which is still far from completion. Much work has already been done, the senior partners in this job being the classicist, the historically oriented New Testament scholar and the archaeologist. Recently

* To Johnnie Roberts: Φίλου πιστού ὃν ἔστιν ἀντάλλαγμα — Ecclesiasticus 6:15.
this team was joined by an enthusiastic new member: the socio-scientific analyst who has brought with him a valuable tool to analyse, understand and describe ancient communities. But even so there are huge gaps that remain, most of which might never be filled. Nevertheless, we should at least try to reduce their number.

To avoid misunderstanding, a *proviso* should be made regarding the use of the word 'community’ in this article. It should not be confused with the idea of a local ἐκκλησία. It serves here as a convenient umbrella term for the total Christian population of Rome, without implying anything about their ecclesiastical structure. I deal with the latter in a separate article (Du Toit 1997b).

2 OUR SOURCES

2.1 The book of Romans

Romans is our obvious primary source. We are confronted, however, with two problems. The first has to do with the specific nature of this letter. Generally speaking, Paul’s letters are occasional writings directed towards specific congregational situations and needs. By means of a responsible mirror reading, a reasonable amount of situational information can be gleaned from them, for instance from the Corinthian correspondence. Unfortunately, this is much less true of Romans. It is certainly not a *doctrinae christianae compendium* as Melanchton characterised it. It was written in a very concrete situation. And yet, since the apostle set out to present his gospel in an orderly way with a view to establishing a positive relationship with his readers, Romans operates with universal and abiding categories more than any other of the undisputed Pauline letters. 'Das Kleid des Augenblicks ist abgefallen' (Bornkamm 1969:109). We do find some situational detail in its opening and closing sections, but in the body of the letter contingency and overt contextuality are markedly restricted. For this reason, Romans divulges much less about its readership than the rest of Paul’s letters.

The second problem concerns the position of Romans 16. Does it form an integral part of the letter or not? If Paul’s extensive greeting-list in this chapter really had a Roman address in mind, it could provide us with quite a lot of what German scholars call ‘Lokalkolorit’. Without it we would not know the name of any one of the first generation Christians in Rome with certainty. Should it be considered part of Romans, it provides us with the names of at least twenty four of them - more than any other Christian group in the New Testament! In addition, Paul not only mentions their names, but also adds invaluable details about several of them. Since I discuss this problem elsewhere (Du Toit 1997a), it must suffice to state here that the case for Romans 16 being an integral part of the original letter to the Romans is so
much stronger than any other option, that we can use its contents with confidence to inform us about the first Christian community in Rome.

2.2 Acts

Although Acts presents its own problems as a reliable historical source, we find some very useful information in chapters 18 and 28.

2.3 Jewish and classical writers

The first century Jewish writers Josephus and Philo provide us with some useful bits of information. Of the large number of Greco-Roman writers who add to our knowledge, I mention only the great Roman historians, especially Tacitus. Deserving of special mention are the satirist Juvenal and the epigrammatic poet Martial, who give us many important glimpses into everyday Roman life and typical human sentiments and reactions.

2.4 Ecclesiastical writers

1 Clement should receive special mention in this context. Also second century sources like Ignatius' Letter to the Romans, the Pastor of Hermas and Justin add some valuable insights. In the case of these sources, however, we have the problem of deciding to what extent they reflect conditions in the middle of the first century.

2.5 Geographical and archaeological information

Rome's distinct geographical features have remained the same throughout the centuries. For this reason, a knowledge of its geography and topography can help us to understand certain aspects of Roman history and society. Archaeological work in Rome has perhaps not produced the same startling discoveries as in Palestine, Egypt or Asia Minor. The fact that Rome is one of those old cities which is still inhabited today impedes archaeological activities considerably. Nevertheless, archaeology has made an extremely important contribution and this work is still continuing.

2.6 Local traditions

In a city with such an ancient history as that of Rome and which has been the main centre of Western church history for so long, one can expect a wide variety of local traditions, especially ecclesiastical ones. Most of these traditions are unreliable, but occasionally they contain a grain of truth. Lampe for instance makes use of them, but considers them the weakest link in his argu-
2.7 Modern writings

The modern sources consulted for this article are presented in the bibliography at the end. A much more representative list for the period up to 1989 can be found in Lampe (1989:369-400 [sic]). Lampe’s own monumental work stands out above the rest. I found that the heuristic value of this book for understanding the life of Roman Christians in the first two centuries cannot be overestimated although I sometimes have to differ from it.

3 THE FIRST INDICATIONS OF A CHRISTIAN PRESENCE IN ITALY

Our earliest sources for the existence of Christians in Italy are of a literary nature. As Lampe has pointed out (1989:1-4) archaeology has been as yet unable to provide unequivocal evidence in this regard. Graffito CIL 4.679 from Pompeii comes the closest (see Dinkler 1967:138-141). It may have read the Latin word *christian*, but this cannot be verified, since the original wording mysteriously disappeared in 1864 (Dinkler 1967:138). If the reading *christian* is correct, it would be the earliest inscriptive reference to Christians in Italy. But this reading is very dubious and probably reflects a strong element of wishful thinking (Dinkler 1967:141). Should it be authentic, it could unfortunately only prove that somebody in the province of Campania, at the latest in the year 79, knew of the existence of Christians somewhere; nothing more (Lampe 1989:2).

The biblical data puts us on firmer soil. Following Lampe’s clue (1989:1-9), we start with Acts 28. There is no good reason to question Luke’s evidence in this regard. When Paul approached Rome under military custody roundabout the year 60 AD, due to his *appellatio* to the emperor, there were seemingly already different groups of Christians in Rome. He was welcomed by two ‘delegations’ of Christian ‘brothers’ (Ac 28:15): one at the *Forum Appii* and the other at *Tres Tabernae*, respectively 65 and 49 kilometers from the famous *caput orbis*. But these were not the first Christians to greet Paul’s entourage on Italian soil. They were met by believers already in Puteoli, at that stage by far the most significant gateway to Rome from the East, and on invitation, stayed there for a week (28:13-14). By the year 60 therefore, there existed at least two Christian communities in Italy—one in Puteoli and another in Rome. There may have been more, but this is as far as our present evidence goes.
Which of these two communities was the oldest? We simply do not know for sure. Wiefel’s categorical statement (1970:71) that Rome was the first city in the western Mediterranean where Christianity took root, is questionable. The chances are positive that the Christian presence in Puteoli preceded that of Rome (vide infra).

But we can move the clock still further backwards. When Paul writes to the Romans in the winter of 55–56 AD, it is clear that he presupposes the existence of an already settled Christian community in Rome. He states, somewhat hyperbolically, that their faith has become known throughout the world (1:8). He also mentions his frequent resolve (πολλάκις—1:13) to visit them and has been frustrated by the fact that it did not materialise (cf εἰ ποτὲ ἤδη ποτέ—1:10). In 15:22–23 he returns to this topic and now specifies that he had already fostered the wish to visit them ‘for many years’. This could induce us to move the clock substantially backwards. But caution is advised. First of all, the possible rhetorical character of Paul’s statements regarding his intended visit should be kept in mind. And secondly, the formulation of Paul’s thanksgiving prayer in 1:8 might indicate that the good news of the acceptance of the Christian faith in Rome had reached Christian circles elsewhere in the not too distant past. We would therefore need some more substantial evidence before we dismiss the more cautious option. Fortunately, such evidence is provided by Luke’s informative remarks in Acts 18:1–2.

The Edict of Claudius referred to in Acts 18:2 (also Suetonius Claudius 25:4; Orosius Hist 7.6.15–16; cf Dio Cassius 60.6.6–7) should, according to Orosius, be dated in 49 AD. Without going into too much detail regarding the problems surrounding Suetonius’ wording (Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantes Roma expulit) and the edict itself (for a discussion of recent positions consult Solin 1983:659, 690), the most likely understanding of Suetonius is still that this edict was intended to stem an ongoing (assidue) uproar among the Jews as a result of the preaching of the Christian gospel (i a Kümmel 1973:269; Cranfield 1977:16; Dunn 1988:xlviii–lix; Lampe 1989:6). The ablative impulsore Chresto indicates that this Chrestos is seen as the instigator of the riots. Suetonius has misunderstood the gospel preaching concerning Jesus Christ as a reference to a person by the name of Chrestos. The pattern here matches the description in Acts exactly: whenever Hellenistic Jewish Christians began preaching the Christian gospel actively, vehement opposition arose in Jewish synagogue circles (Ac 6:9–7; 9:22–25, 29; 14:5–6, 19; 17:13; 18:5–6, 12–17). We can therefore trace the first open and active preaching of the Christian gospel to the time immediately preceding the Edict of Claudius, more or less the year 48 AD. This fits in neatly with Luke’s reference to Aquila and Priscilla, who came to Corinth from Rome shortly before Paul’s arrival in the first half of 50 AD (cf Du Toit 1985:32–
34). Although Luke’s wording explicitly states that all the Jews were expelled from Rome, this seems to be an overstatement in view of the large numbers of Jews in Rome, several of them having Roman citizenship. More probably, only the main culprits in the eyes of the Roman authorities were banished (Leon 1995:26-27). If this was the case, Priscilla and Aquila may have been among the leading ‘instigators’ on the Christian side, actively engaging themselves in furthering the gospel (see Ac 18:24-26; 1 Cor 16:19; Rm 16:3-5).

In the light of what has just been said, we can now return to the possibility that the ‘many years’ of Romans 15:23 might imply that we should move the clock substantially backwards from 55-56 AD. Important in this regard is Bornkamm’s conjecture (1969:68-71) that Paul, as a sharp missionary strategist, had already intended during his second missionary journey to continue from Thessalonica along the famous Via Egnatia towards Rome. We should probably date the start of this missionary journey in spring or summer of 49 AD (Du Toit 1985:25-35) and Paul’s arrival in Thessalonica sometime in spring 50 AD. Why then did Paul not go through with his plan? Was it due to the uproar in Thessalonica (Bornkamm 1969:71)? Perhaps. Most interesting, however, is Suhl’s contention (1971:129) that the first news of the Edict of Claudius reached Paul roundabout this stage. Chronologically this would not only fit in well with our dating of Paul’s stay in Thessalonica and his subsequent arrival in Corinth (Du Toit 1985:25-35), as well as with that of the Edict of Claudius and the coming of Aquila and Priscilla to Corinth, but it would also make it probable that Paul’s desire to visit the Roman Christians was awakened at its latest in the year 50, or perhaps even earlier, in 49 AD. The fact that he knew that there were already Christians in Rome at that stage (Rm 15:23), could then be another indication that the year 48 is a conservative terminus ad quem for the arrival of Christianity in Rome. In reality, there may have been Christians in Rome perhaps even a decade or more earlier, but unfortunately we have no evidence to bear this out. These Christians would, however, not have been numerous and would have kept a low profile. They most probably saw and presented themselves as a Jewish group who regarded Jesus Christ as the promised messiah. This enabled them to remain unchallenged within the synagogue, although also meeting privately in suitable homes, and enjoy the official safeguarding of Jewish faith as being one of the collegia licita (cf Jeffers 1991:40).

By the year 48 or early 49, the uneasy honeymoon was over. Orthodox Jews in the synagogues of Rome began increasingly to experience the Christian presence and activity as a menace. For this there could have been several reasons. The number of Christians may have increased alarmingly. Their theology was increasingly seen to be cutting across the more orthodox position. And they probably became more active and vocal in their preaching
of the Christian gospel. The orthodox Jewish groups reacted strongly and confrontation followed. Since Roman Jewry most probably did not function as an organisational unit (Leon 1995:168-170; Wiefel 1970:74-75; Penna 1982:328-329; Solin 1983:696-697; Lampe 1989:368; undecided Applebaum 1974:498-501), we should not think in terms of one decisive confrontation, but rather in terms of a series of clashes which, with a domino-effect, moved from synagogue to synagogue. Wiefel calls it ‘eine Reihe von tumultartigen Auseinandersetzungen’ (1970:75). This also does better justice to the participial phrase *assidue tumultuantes* of Suetonius. Claudius, who was initially quite favourably disposed towards the Jews, was forced to issue his well-known edict. The combined effect of the Jewish-Christian confrontation and the drastic measure by emperor Claudius was the parting of the ways between church and synagogue. When Paul writes his letter to the Romans he presupposes an independent Christian community. His letter shows no trace of an ongoing internal feud with Judaism (including Rm 14-15). The persecution under Nero also makes it clear that the Christians were at that stage already a clearly defined separate group (Lampe 1989:9).

4 HOW DID THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN ROME COME INTO BEING?

It is a truism that Christianity in Rome does not originate from the work of a prominent apostle. Had that been the case, it would be very strange that important sources like Romans, *1 Clement*, Ignatius’ *Letter to the Romans*, the *Pastor of Hermas* and Justin mention nothing in this regard.

Before we try to arrive at more positive answers, one preliminary remark should be made. The traffic, not only of material goods, but also of ideas, within the *imperium romanum* should not be underestimated. The process of Hellenisation and, following that, the unifying power of the Roman principate, transformed the Mediterranean world into an early ‘global village’ within which the communication and exchange of ideas, ideologies and religions was the order of the day (see especially Sanday & Headlam 1914:xxvi). Rome, as the pulsing centre of all social, political, economic, juridical and cultural activity, also attracted every new belief like a magnet. Tacitus described it as the city where ‘all horrors and abominations of the world converged’ (*Ann* 15.44). This included all non-Roman religions, also Christianity. Our sources give ample evidence of the multitude of foreign cults, mainly from the East, which had reached Rome and found adherents and places of worship there (cf La Piana 1927:282-340). It was therefore certain that the Christian message would rather sooner than later find its way to Rome, the only uncertainty being the 'how soon' and 'by whom'.
It has already been pointed out that the two cities where Christianity first established itself in Italy were at the same time the two key-centres on the trade routes from the East: Puteoli, the most important Italian seaport of the time, where ships from Alexandria and elsewhere off-loaded their cargo, and Rome as the final destination of these imports. Since the late third century BC Puteoli had been Rome's main port, since it was the only available natural harbour of some size on the western coast. In the first century its importance and wealth increased immensely, especially due to the fact that the fleet carrying the massive regular grain import for the annona urbis from Alexandria and elsewhere to Italy, off-loaded its cargo in Puteoli (cf Frederiksen 1959:c.2043-2045). With the many ships there came also the religious beliefs of the immigrants, the fortune-seekers, the craftsmen, the naviculari who transported the cargo, and many others. We have evidence that various religions from the East reached Rome first via Puteoli (Lampe 1989:4). Puteoli, like Rome, had a cosmopolitan population and was home to many cults, especially from the East (Frederiksen 1959:c.2052-2053). It is not by chance that the oldest Serapis temple in Italy that we know of was situated in Puteoli. It can be dated back to 105 BC (Vidman 1981:133).

In the light of the above, it is understandable why Puteoli and Rome are the only Italian cities for which we possess reliable evidence of Jewish settlements preceding the Christian era (Josephus BJ 2.104-105; AJ 17.328-331; Vita 16; Philo Leg Gai 155). The Christian message could have reached Italy, and especially these two strategic centres, quite spontaneously through Jewish Christian travellers or immigrants, merchants, ships' crews, craftsmen dependent on the shipping industry, vendors, et cetera. These could have been the first Christians of Italy. This reconstruction also makes it probable that Christianity might have taken hold in Puteoli earlier than in Rome.

Can we identify some of these first Roman Christians still closer? Due to his trade as a tentmaker, Aquila would have had links with commerce and the shipping industry. Therefore Lampe observes, quite correctly, that he and his wife Prisca could very well have been representative of this group (1989:4). But they were not only Christians. The picture we get of them in Acts as well in Pauline literature is that of active, though part-time, missionary workers and patrons of the church (Ac 18:3,18,26; 1 Cor 16:19; Rm 16:3-5).

Other avenues to explain how Christianity came to Rome are also taken. Judge (1966:83-84) mentions some of these. The traditional view is that the message was taken to Rome by the Roman Jews present at the Pentecost (Ac 2:10), or by the Roman centurion Cornelius and Sergius Paulus, the Roman proconsul of Cyprus. The latter two suggestions are more ingenious than convincing. The first one might contain some element of truth, but it would
be misleading to motivate this from Acts 2:10 alone, since the verb ἐπιδημοῦντες used there refers to people who have taken up residence in Jerusalem (but vide infra). It could also be asked whether Luke’s extensive list was not intended to accentuate the ecumenical dimensions of Pentecost rather than to give an exact historical description. On the other hand the statement that these people dwelt in Jerusalem reveals historical knowledge which is corroborated in Acts 6:9 (cf infra).

The suggestion by Wilckens (1978:38-39) deserves more detailed attention. He finds the possible answer in the reference of Acts 6:9 to the Synagogue of the Freedmen. Most of these freedmen or liberti were the offspring of Jews who were carried off to Rome in 63 BC by Pompey. They were sold into slavery, subsequently released and some of them thereupon returned to Palestine. Those who settled in Jerusalem organised themselves into the synagogue mentioned. They are therefore the same group referred to in Ac 2:10. Wilckens surmises that some members of this group accepted the preaching of the Stephen circle and returned to Rome as a result of the persecution of these Hellenistic Christians. Like the other dispersed members of this circle (Ac 8:4-40; 11:19-21), they, on their arrival in Rome, disseminated the Christian gospel there.

This suggestion by Wilckens sounds very plausible indeed. The weak point in his presentation is that he seems to ignore the chronological problem. If the dispersion of the Stephen circle took place roundabout 32 AD, it leaves us with a time span of sixteen years before the riots which led to the Edict of Claudius broke out in Rome. In that case we shall have to explain why the confrontation between these Hellenistic Jewish Christians and the Jewish community in Rome did not take place much earlier. (The possibility that these Christians did not join the synagogue at all, but kept to themselves, meeting regularly in their house-churches, should be ruled out since the most obvious understanding of the riots would be that the various confrontations took place within the synagogue. This means that the first Jewish Christians in Rome still belonged to the synagogue.) One or more of the following possibilities could explain why a confrontation was delayed for so long:

1) These Jewish Christians kept a low profile within the synagogue context, cultivating their specific beliefs in their house-churches.

2) Their numbers were still small and they were therefore not seen as a threat to more orthodox Jewish views.

3) The Jewish community in Rome was more tolerant than the one in Jerusalem which took offence at the temple criticism of the Jewish Christians and their liberal attitude towards the law.

In this context, two of the names in Paul’s greeting-list, viz those of Andronicus and Junia (Rm 16:7), are most interesting. The name Ἰουνίας
could be male or female, depending on the accent. I have argued elsewhere that the female accusative Ἰουνία definitely deserves priority (Du Toit 1997a). The way Paul refers to these two persons most probably indicates that they were husband and wife. They were obviously old acquaintances of Paul’s. He adds four important bits of information about them. First of all they were fellow-Jews. Secondly, they were συναγωγικοί of Paul. This could either mean that they shared a prison-period with him at a stage and place unknown to us, or, linguistically less likely, that they shared the same fate as Paul, viz that of having been imprisoned (Cranfield 1979:789). Thirdly, they were ἐπίσημοι ἐν τοῖς ἀποστόλοις, which could either mean that they were apostles, and as such had a fine reputation, which is the more obvious understanding, or that the apostles held them in high esteem. However, both options point to the early Jerusalem church. And in the fourth place, Paul mentions that they became Christians before him. Points 1, 3 and 4, taken together, make it very plausible that they originally belonged to the Hellenistic Jewish community in Jerusalem, in fact to the Synagogue of the Freedmen, and then became part of the Stephen circle. This couple were probably liberti and could originally have met in Rome. Junia is a very typical Roman name. Two hundred and fifty occurrences of this name are documented in Rome (Lampe 1989:139). It is interesting that Lampe, although he states that the name Junia is of Latin origin (1989:140) does not consider the possibility that she could originally have gone from Rome to the East, but prefers to underline, as a general maxim, that names and geographical origin no longer correlated at this stage. That Andronicus and Junia were ‘fellow-prisoners’ of Paul could indicate that they did not go to Rome directly, but first did missionary work elsewhere. Paul would have met them first in Jerusalem—Acts 6:9 mentions also persons from Cilicia—and perhaps again on his missionary journeys.

If the above argument holds water, it would not only corroborate Wilckens’s view, it would also point to Andronicus and Junia as being, together with Prisca and Aquila, pioneer missionary workers in Rome.

In conclusion: we cannot determine exactly how Christianity in Rome began. We have no indication that it was due to the foundational work of a prominent apostle. On the other hand, it would be misleading, in the light of Romans 16, to ascribe Christianity in Rome exclusively to the spontaneous witness of ordinary Christians. The indications are that we have to reckon with a combination of two factors. On the one hand, Christianity came ‘spontaneously’ to Rome. Travellers, immigrants, merchants, craftsmen, vendors and many others, using the busy trade route from Puteoli to Rome, brought the Christian message to Rome as part and parcel of their daily existence. On the other hand, there were also more active and purposeful mis-
sionaries like Prisca and Aquila, Andronicus and Junia, although they were not necessarily full-time Christian workers. It is also likely that some of these missionary pioneers originally belonged to the Hellenistic Jewish Christian group in Jerusalem who were persecuted and, after being dispersed, eventually also went to Rome.

5 WHERE DID THE FIRST ROMAN CHRISTIANS LIVE?

In his important research of the living areas and conditions of the Roman Christians, Peter Lampe (1989:10-52) made use of five criteria: local traditions, archeological evidence regarding the location of the oldest Jewish and Christian cemeteries, information about the oldest Jewish residential districts, calculations regarding the density of the tituli and literary information about the oldest locally definable business practices of Christians. It is fascinating to observe how all five of these research tracts converge to prove that Roman Christians of the first centuries were concentrated in specific areas. For our purpose, it is important to ask which of these come into consideration for the first generation Christians.

The two areas where Christians settled first were the Trastevere (originally: Transtiberinum) district, situated within the concavity formed by the bend of the Tiber, directly west of the old city centre of Rome, and the urban stretch on both sides of the Via Appia between the Almone stream and the Porta Capina (Lampe 1989:10-52). Trastevere, lying, as its name indicates, on the opposite side of the Tiber, was despised by the Roman aristocracy and citizens who preferred the central part within the old republican wall. It was, according to Philo (Leg Gai 155) and all other historical indications, the original living district of the Jews, and of foreigners in general (cf also Leon 1995:135-137). There is little doubt that this was also the first living quarters of the first generation Christians. It was a peripheral area which was only incorporated into Rome by Augustus. Being situated on the bend of the river, Trastevere was marshy and unhealthy and no Roman would care to live there. On the higher-lying parts and hills to the north and south, however, luxurious Roman villas and large gardens could be found (Lampe 1989:36-38, he also provides extensive literature; Leon 1995:137).

The stretch around the tractus urbanus of the Via Appia also comes into consideration as a living area for the first generation Christians. It was also a low-lying, humid neighbourhood. It was definitely inhabited by Christians in the second century, but probably some first generation Christians also lived there. Early in the second century Juvenal (Sat 3.12-16) refers to Jews living there and the number of Jewish and Christian cemeteries in the vicinity points towards strong and early Jewish and Christian occupation (cf Lampe 1989:10-45).
The Aventin and Aventin Minor districts, lying inbetween the Trastevere and Via Appia regions, form a natural link between the latter, and the low-lying parts of the Aventin districts were the obvious third area to be inhabited by Christians (Lampe 1989:10-48). But the period during which this took place falls outside the scope of this article.

Trastevere and the Via Appia stretch were, however, not the only living quarters of the first Roman Christians. We should also keep in mind the slaves who stayed with their masters. The latter resided in the more well-to-do parts of Rome. In the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus (Rm 16:10-11) there would have been such Christian slaves, unless they were all liberti. Both patrones belonged to the more well-off and would have possessed quite a number of slaves. Aristobulus was a well-known name in the Herodian family. If he was indeed the grandson of Herod the Great and brother of Agrippa I who died (probably) in Rome in the forties (Dunn 1988:896), he certainly was a very wealthy man. After his death, some or all of his slaves could have become part of the imperial household, or perhaps liberti. If Narcissus, the extremely powerful general secretary of Claudius (Alfoldy 1991:132), is to be identified with the Narcissus of Romans 16:11, the latter would also have possessed a vast number of slaves.

It was in the regions outside the Pomerium, the traditional kernel of Rome, where foreign cults were prohibited, that many mystery religions took root (see e.g Lampe 1989:42-43, 48). On the present area of the Vatican to the north-west of Trastevere there were for instance sanctuaries for Isis as well as for Cybele-Attis. One cannot help asking whether more than one of Paul's addressees, on hearing Paul's words about the Christian's dying and rising with Christ (Romans 6:3-11), would not be reminded of what he heard along the grapevine about the mysterious things happening in the nearby Isis or Cybele sanctuaries (cf the apt remark of Lampe 1989:43).

6 SOCIO-ECONOMIC INDICATIONS

The Trastevere and the Via Appia areas were inhabited predominantly by the poor masses of Rome. Both were densely populated. Especially in Trastevere, a huge and heterogeneous population was huddled together in a small area. La Piana (1927:207-213), Lampe (1989:38) and Leon (1995:135-137) draw an unsavoury but realistic picture of Trastevere. Its pulsing centre was the harbour in the Tiber. Travellers, immigrants and all kinds of people connected to the shipping industry disembarked here, many settling in Trastevere itself. Huge store-houses for the cargoes of the ships stood here. Mills using water-power provided by the Tiber ground the imported grain supplies. Human load-carriers and carts moved the goods from point to point. Artisans with their small industries were busy here: ivory carvers, potters, carpenters, tent-
makers. In the narrow, crowded streets vendors erected their stalls and noisily offered their ware: salt fish, hot peas, steaming sausages and much more. Snake charmers and fortune tellers advertised their activities. The stench of abattoirs and of tanneries using urine from the public toilets hung in the air.

The Appian plain was much more densely populated at its Porta Capena end than in the south. It was, according to Lampe (1989:43), characterised by incoming and outgoing traffic. Instead of ships, there were transport carts, coming from the south along the Via Appia, that off-loaded their goods here. Donkey drivers, merchants, artisans, bakers and also beggars made their presence known.

What were the more specific residential conditions of these urban Christians? The northern stretch of the Appian region and especially Trastevere were characterised by the huge preponderance of insulae (apartment buildings) as opposed to the domus or private houses of the socially arrived. According to Lampe's calculations there were 4405 insulae in the fourth century Trastevere compared to only 150 domus. In the first century the ratio would not have been much different. The fact that there were also some private houses in Trastevere should make us aware of the fact that there were not only poor people living in Trastevere itself. These houses could vary from simple dwellings to more luxurious ones. Some of the more well-to-do liberti probably owned some of these houses. Then there were also the fine mansions and gardens of the still more wealthy, situated on the slopes of the Ianiculum, rising from the Transtibertine valley (Leon 1995:137).

The overwhelming majority of Trastevere belonged, however, to the plebs romana. This implies that they were relatively poor and lived in apartment blocks. Tucker (1910:139-142) and others (e.g. La Piana 1927:209-211) give a vivid description of these Roman insulae. They could be four or five stories high, surrounded by four of the narrow streets, lanes or alleys which formed a 'network' in the city. The lowest floor, on the street level, containing shops, store-rooms, bathing quarters et cetera, was open during the day, but shuttered and barred at night. Tenants used a room or a set of rooms on the upper stories for accommodation. Some of these quarters boasted to be 'suitable for a knight' (Tucker 1910:140), of course requiring a corresponding income. However, by far the most were very basic, even primitive. 'Flimsy tenements of wood and plaster of rapid and cheap construction filled all the available space and returned large profits to the owners and to legions of middle-men who rented and subrented small apartments and rooms, fleecing the tenants. Forced evictions, exposure, confiscation of furniture and household goods were common events, and not seldom riots and tumults of exasperated tenants kept the whole city in turmoil' (La Piana 1927:210).
apartments were often very dark inside, with still darker stair-cases and, because of the cheap material and wood, were regular fire-traps (La Piana 1927:210).

The large majority of the first Roman Christians could not afford luxurious or even middle class living conditions. They would have lived in these simple or even shabby apartments or rooms. We can accept that the tentmaker Aquila and his wife rented an apartment in Trastevere, or less likely—because of their occupation—in the Appia region, which contained facilities spacious enough to accommodate their workshop and a house-church. Here also Paul rented an apartment in an insula (Ac 28:30).

It is advisable to differentiate between the social status and the economic position of the Roman Christians, since these two factors were closely related, but did not coincide in all respects (Alfoldy 1988:147, 149).

The Christian community in Rome found themselves within a rigid, hierarchically determined, status conscious societal structure (Alfoldy 1988:147, 149). In essence, Roman society had no middle class, but only an elite and a lower class (cf Alfoldy 1988:147, 149). There was a momentous distance between, on the one hand, the higher strata of Roman society, consisting of the three ordines, viz the ordo senatorius, the ordo equester and the ordo decurionum (the provincial elite), which constituted what was later called the honestiores, and, on the other hand, the humiliiores or tenuiores which constituted the ordinary plebs. The plebs was vertically divided into the ingenui (freeborn Romans), liberti (freedmen) and servi (slaves) (Alfoldy 1988:146). Alongside them there were also the free peregrini from foreign countries. To belong to the three elite classes required certain qualifications. Upward mobility among these classes was possible, as long as one could satisfy the increasing requirements. It was, however extremely difficult to move from the humiliiores to the honestiores. Usually it was impossible to end up in the ordo senatorius. This was especially true of the liberti. We know that some of them, as a result of their entrepreneural skills and intellectual qualities, as well as the contacts and infrastructure at their disposal through their patrons, acquired massive fortunes. Amongst others they focussed on commerce, banking, crafts and real estate (Alfoldy 1988:131). And yet, in spite of their impressive economical prowess, the existing social barriers denied almost all of them entrance into the ranks of the honestiores. Even those slaves and liberti of the imperial household who enjoyed immense powers and prestige, could not, as a result of the taint of their servile origin, overcome the critical social barriers. In practice they could obtain a status equal to the ordo decurionum, but they could never reach the societal summits. This was true even of personalities like Trimalchio and doctor Merula, both of whom amassed great fortunes (Alfoldy 1988:113–114).
Trastevere and the Appian region were the homeground of the plebs. Their societal status ranged from the lowest level to what, in modern societies, would be reckoned as social middle class or even high middle class: slaves, beggars, manual labourers, craftsmen, merchants, legal advisors, artists, doctors, teachers and engineers. Liberti could find themselves on any of the low to the higher levels of this scale, depending on their patrons, capabilities and resources.

Exactly where the first generation Christians whom Paul addressed found themselves on the social scale cannot be determined with confidence. We can, however, state that, as far as our evidence goes, there was nobody who belonged to the honestiores. Lampe's analysis of Romans 16 (1989:141-153) could, with some probability, identify only 4 freeborn persons from the 24 names mentioned, viz Urbanus, Aquila, Prisca and Rufus. At least nine were of servile origin, viz Nereus, Hermes, Persis, Herodion, Tryphosa, Tryphaena, Junianus/Junia, Julia and Ampliatus. About the remaining 11, he finds it impossible to make a decision. It is significant, however, to note that, of the 13 names which Lampe could connect with some confidence to a definite societal status, more than two thirds were of servile origin. The chances are good, however, that several of the remaining 11 were also liberti. The mere fact that Andronicus came to Rome from the East is no argument at all against his possible servile origin (contra Lampe 1989:153), since Andronicus and his wife Junia (who most probably was a liberta—cf Lampe 1989:153) could originally have gone as freedmen from Rome to Jerusalem (see supra). Also the names Asyncritus, Patrobas and Philologus show, according to one of Lampe's criteria (1989:152), an affinity towards the category of unfree origin. But even Aquila and Prisca, whom Lampe lists under the freeborn, could have been liberti, perhaps of a distinguished Roman family from whom they took their names (Cranfield 1979:784 n 1). Of the remaining names, several others could also have been of servile origin, but, due to the insufficiency of our data, we cannot prove this. Furthermore, we should keep in mind that most, if not all, of those from the households of Aristobulus and Narcissus would be either slaves or freedmen. It would therefore be a safe guess to say that more than two thirds of those referred to in Paul's greeting-list would have been of servile origin. It may not be wise to draw a conclusion from this regarding the Christian community in Rome as a whole. On the other hand there seems to be no clear reason why Paul's greeting list would have warped this specific aspect (cf also Dunn 1988:900). It would at any rate be safe to conclude that the large majority of the first Christian community in Rome were either liberti or slaves and that they drew the bulk of their members, if not all, from the lower strata of society (so also La Piana 1927:184; Dunn 1988:900). Those who were not of servile
origin were either freeborn *peregrini* or perhaps *ingenui* belonging to the lower class. Although we can note a gradual upward mobility among the Roman Christians in the following decades, *liberti* and slaves still constituted an important element even in the second century. The writer of the influential book of *Hermas* for instance, who was at a certain stage quite a wealthy man and whose brother served as a presbyter, was originally a *verna*, that is a slave child. Lampe even considers him a typical representative of the Roman Christianity of his time (1989:198-200).

I have already mentioned that the rigidity of Roman class prejudice was such that even wealthy freedmen could not really get rid of the taint of having been a slave. The fact that such a large component of Paul's Roman readers were either slaves or ex-slaves, throws an interesting light on the way Paul interrupts himself in Romans 6:19. From 6:16 onwards he makes ample use of slavery metaphors in order to engrain into the minds of his readers the importance of a righteous life. Verse 18 reads: ‘having been set free from sin, you have become enslaved to righteousness’. At this stage he suddenly seems to realise that he, although speaking metaphorically, was stepping on very sensitive toes. Therefore he adds almost apologetically: ‘I am speaking in human terms, because of the weakness of your flesh’. This statement could be paraphrased as follows: ‘Please understand that I am really only using slave metaphors in order to help you to follow me better’.

Two important freedmen who could have been among the first Roman Christians were Claudius Ephebus and Valerius Biton. Paul does not mention them by name, perhaps because they were still quite young. Or were they included in the household connected to the name of Aristobulus which may have become part of the *domus caesaris* after their master's death? They are mentioned in 1 *Clement* (63:3; 65:1) as the two senior figures to whom this letter to the Corinthians was entrusted. They were clearly two leading figures, probably from the same church group as that of the writer (Jeffers 1988:126, 128), who, through their personal *engagement*, added weight to the letter (Jeffers 1988:126-128; Lampe 1989:153-155). They were also designated to act as ‘witnesses’ between the two churches (63:3). Their *nomina gentilicia*, Claudius and Valerius, connects them to the imperial house of Claudius (his wife Messalina belonged to the *gens valeria*). On their release, slaves often adopted the names of their patrons. This was a positive strategy which stood them in good stead. The imperial freedmen, although they could never reach senatorial rank, in certain instances enjoyed a status analogous to that of the equestrian order (Alfoldy 1988: 132). 1 *Clement* declares specifically that these two emissaries lived among the Roman Christians ‘from their youth’ (63:3). This makes it quite probable that they were still Christian youngsters at the time when Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.
Jeffers has made a study of the conceptual world of 1 Clement and shows that it revealed an intimate knowledge of the ruling elite's values (1991:97-105). He therefore suspects that Clement himself was an imperial libertus (1991:33) and that the church of Clement consisted of imperial freedmen or slaves or at least freedmen and slaves from the great houses of Rome (1991:105). He even suspects, somewhat adventurously, that this church met under Domitilla's patronage in a warehouse situated on a property which she owned (1991:198).

We have no certain evidence that there was any high-born Roman among the first Roman Christians. The case of the mysterious Pomponia Graecina, wife of the consul Aulus Plautius, who was accused of superstitio externa, has to remain open. With the available evidence a decision as to whether she was a Christian or not, is impossible (Lampe 1989:164-165). Had she indeed been a Christian, her life span would overlap with the beginnings of Christianity in Rome. The case of the Roman senator M. Acilius Glabrio is even more uncertain (Lampe 1989:172).

The first aristocrat of whom we can be well-nigh certain that she was a Christian, was Flavia Domitilla, a lady from the highest circles and a family member of emperor Domitian. Although there are some problems with the interpretation of the relevant sources (cf Lampe 1989:166-171), there can be little doubt that she was banished in 96 AD as a result of her Christian convictions, but received amnesty from Nerva a year later.

In conclusion: it seems clear that, although some influential freedmen may have been connected to Roman Christianity quite early (cf also Cranfield 1979:790-795; Dunn 1988:896-900), the Christian message first took root, and found the overwhelming majority of its members, among the lower social groups. Gradually, however, it moved upwards along the social ladder, till it began to reach the higher classes in the last decades of the first century.

This latter development is confirmed by the letter of Ignatius to the Romans (Lampe 1989:70). Ignatius has one fear: that his longing to become a martyr for Christ might be thwarted by the intervention of influential people at the Roman court. He fears that their very love will do him the 'injustice' of denying him his heart's desire, and declares explicitly that it would be easy for them to do exactly that (Rom 1:2). He fears that they will 'spare' him (1:2), that they will 'begrudge' him this privilege (3:1), that they will 'hinder' or 'impede' him (4:1; 6:2). He begs them to remain silent (2:2). Although these statements do not allow us to determine the social status of these Christians, it is at least clear that the Roman Christian community now have strong contacts in high places. By the end of the second century we find Christians in all ranks of Roman society, including that of the senatorial aristocracy, although most of them are still women (Lampe 1989:95-96).
How many of the first Roman Christians were Roman citizens? We should keep in mind that Roman slaves were mostly set free roundabout the age of 30 (Alfoldy 1988:140, 336, 359, 369). On their release, they originally also received Roman citizenship, a privilege inherited by their children. However, the ever increasing number of new citizens became a social and political threat to the Roman state (Alfoldy 1988:140) and as a result of this, various measures were adopted to regulate and stem the flood. The lex Junia (roundabout 19 AD) decreed that certain freedmen would only receive 'Latin rights'. For this reason we simply do not know how many freedmen among the first Christians in Rome were also Roman citizens. If there were imperial freedmen among them, these would most probably have enjoyed this distinction. However, it is improbable that more than a few of these first Christians would have been Roman citizens, since the slaves and probably most freedmen have to be excluded, and perhaps all freeborn peregrini. The Christians crucified by Nero could certainly not have been Roman citizens, since the latter were excluded from this type of punishment (Dunn 1988:lii; Lampe 1989:66 n 189).

We now come to the economic position of the first generation Christians. In accordance with their low social status, most of them being slaves and liberti, as well as the fact that Trastevere and the region around the tractus urbanus of the Via Appia was poor man's land, and also the epigraphic evidence (Lampe 1989:114–116), there is little doubt that the majority of them were economically below middle-class. There were definitely a substantial number of relatively poor among them. Lampe even considers the poor to very poor in the majority (1989:112–114), but, in the light of Paul's letter to the Romans, this might be a somewhat too negative conclusion (vide infra). For those of the poor members who may have enjoyed the privilege of Roman citizenship the daily grain portion from the annona urbis (cf La Piana 1927:192, 199) would provide a minimum subsistence. Others were in more dire straits. In the nineties, some Roman Christians were in such a desperate position that fellow Christians sold themselves into slavery in order to feed their brethren (1 Clement 55:2). Although their economic position changed so much during the second century that the Roman Christians rendered extensive and regular aid even to overseas churches, Minucius Felix could still declare, in the beginning of the third century, that most Roman Christians were poor (36:3). By the middle of the third century no less than 1 500 widows were taken care of (Lampe 1989:104). However, this is only one side of the coin.

As already mentioned, social status and economic position did not automatically overlap. In spite of their low social status, the freedmen implied in Romans 16 could have been somewhat better off, for instance if they were
liberti from the houses of Aristobulus and Narcissus, or from the domus caesaris (vide supra). Due to their patronage, economic connections and personal capabilities most of these would belong to what we can call an economic middle-class. La Piana speaks of the likes of these as the 'petty bourgeoisie', whom he describes as the shop-owners, the retail-traders, the money traders (bankers), the artisans, the teachers and doctors (La Piana 1927:202). Some freedmen in Roman society even became very rich, but we do not know of such persons in first century Roman Christianity. There may have been a few belonging to an economic upper middle-class. They would have been, however, the lucky ones. Other freedmen were less fortunate. They found it quite difficult to survive outside the protective surroundings of the household of their masters, where they at least had the security of food and housing. In addition, they often still had, after their release, economic and moral obligations towards their patrons. Alföldy even calls their situation 'a refined form of exploitation' (1988:141).

All in all it would therefore be safe to say that the economic position of these first Christians varied from poor to 'middle class', the preponderance lying towards what we can call a low middle-class. This general picture of an economically low middle-class community, containing a substantial number of poor, but with a sprinkling of better-offs, corresponds with what we can derive from other sections of the book of Romans. Nowhere does Paul explicitly refer to rich or poor among his readers. He does, however, imply an economic gradation in 12:8. According to this exhortation, there were those who could share of their means with the less fortunate and who performed acts of mercy and, of course, also those who needed alimentation. And in 12:13 the readers are encouraged to share in the needs of the saints and to exercise hospitality. According to 13:1-7 there were those who had to be encouraged to pay their tributes and taxes. He also hoped (obviously not without reason) that they could contribute towards his missionary enterprise in Spain. There can be little doubt that the προπεμφθῶνες of 15:24 would include some financial sponsorship.

What was the economic position of Aquila and Prisca? In recent publications their material resources are seen as quite substantial. Hengel for instance is of the opinion that they belonged to the financial upper class, possessing a tentmakers' enterprise with branches elsewhere (1973:46; cf Dunn 1988:892). Ollrog (1979:26–27 n 164) considers them an affluent couple who could even take family members and slaves with them on their voyages. But these views may be too optimistic. The fact that they could accommodate house churches in Ephesus as well as in Rome (1 Cor 16:19; Rm 16:5) does not necessarily indicate that they actually bought these houses (and perhaps also one in Corinth—cf Ac 18:3) (contra Dunn 1988:892). It is as possible that
they were in a position to rent apartment buildings, large enough to house their workshop, as well as a small church meeting, and also, as happened in Corinth, travelling missionaries like Paul and perhaps Apollos (Ac 18:2–3 cf 26). In contrast with Hengel, Lampe takes great pains to show that tent-makers generally occupied a very humble position on the economic scale and that Aquila and Prisca shared in this (1989:159–164). His argument, however, smacks somewhat of a petitio principii. In spite of his extensive remarks regarding the low cost of seafare, the more obvious understanding of their ability to move about, as well as their various forms of hospitality to fellow Christians, is that they, although socially of low status, belonged to the financial middle-class, perhaps even a somewhat affluent middle-class. In Corinth they could afford to take Paul in as a partner. In Ephesus they ‘risked their necks’ for Paul (Rm 16:4), which may imply that they used their influence and perhaps also financial means (Dunn 1988:892) to save him. The gratitude of ‘all the gentile churches’ may be due to what they did for Paul, but also to various forms of hospitality, guidance and sponsorship. In Rome they probably had a regular staff working for them and they could start all over again on their return. At any rate, it seems doubtful that their premises were so modest that the house congregations had to sit on stacks of tent material as Lampe suggests (1989:161). On the other hand it would be unwarranted as well as anachronistic to classify them as well-to-do international entrepreneurs in the modern sense of the word.

Corresponding to the upward social mobility of Roman Christianity in the last decades of the first century, we find allusions to rich Christians in 1 Clement. In his paraenesis directed towards the Corinthians, but which would not be without relevance to the situation of his own brothers in Rome (Lampe 1989:69), the author admonishes: ‘Let the rich minister to the poor’ (38:2).

To conclude, Adolf Deissmann was of the opinion that the early Christian communities in the Greco-Roman world came mainly from the middle and lower social classes (1925:186). He spoke of the ‘small people who lived from the obolos and denarius’ (1925:56). On the other hand Malherbe (1977:31), supported by Meeks (1983:73), spoke of an ‘emerging consensus’ in modern research that the Pauline congregations represented a fair cross-cut of their respective urban societies. This judgement may indeed be true of the church of Corinth and some other ecclesiastical groups in the New Testament, but it would not apply to the Roman Christian community of the middle first century. Socially they belonged to the lower classes. Apart from one very uncertain exception (that of Pomponia Graecina), we do not know of any high-ranking Roman among them. Economically they were somewhat below middle-class with a substantial poor element, and probably, in a few
cases, upper middle-class. High social status and wealthy Roman Christians come to the fore only some decades later. For Rome at least the answer would therefore lie somewhere between Deissmann and the 'emerging consensus', but nearer to the former.

This conclusion regarding the Christians in Rome indicates how methodologically precarious it is to presuppose uncritically that all Pauline congregations showed the same or approximately the same social differentiation (Lampe 1989:451). Schöllgen's warning note in this regard and his critical remarks in general (Schöllgen 1988) deserve serious consideration.

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