

Your Letters



Thy Word is true from the beginning

The *Testimony* is to be commended for its Special Issue of June-July 2010. While contributions supportive of the priceless inspired Word of God are necessary at all times, the cumulative effect of such varied evidence is particularly timely and fitting. Contributing brethren are thanked for their efforts.

The times in which we live are increasingly threatening to the household of faith. Even papal and Anglican quarters are united in their public warnings against the threat of 'secularism'. Our Lord Jesus is much more explicit when he says that "iniquity shall abound, and the love of many shall wax cold". In order to meet our needs in

these last days, it would be appreciated if these articles, or similar ones, were to appear in the *Testimony* on a regular basis.

It is likely that many readers are familiar with the impressive statement, "The Bible is not such a book as man would have made, if he could; or could have made, if he would". This is the basic theme of a book by Henry Rogers, entitled, *The Superhuman Origin of the Bible*. It was commended to the present writer some years ago, which commendation he heartily passes on. Being a nineteenth-century writing (1874), intended readers may well have to exercise perseverance in coping with that style. However, it will be well worth while.

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Exposition

Paul's epic journey to Rome

Supplementary studies (4)

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Jewry at the time of Christ was subject to Rome; Roman governors supported by Roman soldiers maintained law and order. The centurion was an important officer in day-to-day matters involving the deployment of soldiers to their duties. Several centurions are brought to our notice in the pages of the New Testament; Julius, the centurion who supervised Paul's transfer to Rome, is the topic of this article.

IN THE COURSE of these studies we have constantly had occasion to speak of Rome. Our Lord himself was born in a modest home in Galilee during the reign of Augustus and was crucified during the reign of Tiberius. His birth in Bethlehem was due to an imperial decree: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world . . . So Joseph also went up from the town

of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David . . ." (Lk. 2:1,4, NIV). Saul of Tarsus, the arch-persecutor later converted by the glorified Jesus not all that long after the Lord's ascension to heaven, was paradoxically a freeborn citizen of the empire (Acts 22:25-28).

Rome in the New Testament

As we read through the New Testament, we have no difficulty in discovering references to Rome. Rome's presence in the land of Palestine came about as a consequence of the fact that Pompey intervened in Jewish affairs and the Jews became subject to the Roman yoke in 63 B.C. While much more could be written about this, what is of more immediate interest, as we begin to focus on the connection between Paul and the centurion Julius, is the frequent mention of

centurions in the New Testament (for example, Matthew 8:5-13 and Luke 7:1-10). One wonders why the admirable Roman officer mentioned by both Matthew and Luke remains nameless in the pages of the New Testament. Another unnamed Roman officer who comes to our attention is the one in charge of the crucifixion (Mt. 27:54; Mk. 15:39; Lk. 23:47). He was sufficiently affected by the situation to marvel at the man being crucified; and we should note especially that he was a witness of those sublime words of Jesus: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34).

This brings us onto the subject of Julius, the officer who was in charge of the detachment of soldiers escorting the Apostle Paul (and others) to Rome. In due course we shall be reviving our memory of the exceptionally kind treatment Paul received from Julius, which was shown above all when he spared Paul's life by restraining his soldiers from killing the prisoners under his charge as they made for the shore after the shipwreck on Malta (Acts 27:42-44). As we reflect upon the conduct of this Roman officer, we perceive what a fine person he was, and how he came to appreciate the personality and character of the Apostle Paul.

What did Julius know about Paul?

But what would Julius actually know about Paul when he was placed under his charge as a prisoner? In answering this question, it must be conceded that there is an element of conjecture. Yet there is at least *some* information at our disposal. If we were writing a historical novel we could allow free rein to the imagination, but this we cannot do. We must simply take account of what Luke records, and then come to whatever interpretation of what he says seems appropriate.

We note first, then, that Julius was stationed at Caesarea. And we note also, in this context, that this was the same city where a Roman centurion called Cornelius had embraced the Christian faith some years before (Acts 10). In his commentary on the Greek text of the Book of Acts, F. F. Bruce draws on Polybius to describe the qualities required in a centurion: "Centurions are desired not to be bold and adventurous so much as good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and

die at their post".¹ This description is helpful, and affords some insight into the character of Julius. What we learn concerning him in Luke's account is in harmony with this description.

If Julius was aware of Paul's Christian faith, he might well have known of the case of Cornelius, the centurion who was the first uncircumcised Gentile recorded as being baptised into the saving name of the Lord Jesus. It would be good if chronology could be of assistance in estimating the possible influence of Cornelius on Julius, but the dating problems are too complex to allow of any confident conclusions; the necessary data are just not available. Yet we can surely conclude, quite legitimately, that Julius would at the very least be acquainted with the circumstances leading up to the Apostle Paul's detention.

On the occasion, recorded in Acts 21, when Paul came to Caesarea bringing the proceeds of the collections organised in Gentile ecclesias for the relief of the Judean believers, he was accompanied by the various representatives of the donating ecclesias. Paul's company were accommodated, the record tells us, in the house of "Philip the evangelist" (v. 8). Philip was "one of the seven" referred to in Acts 6:1-6; he was a trusted minister of the gospel; he had been preaching in Samaria (8:4,5); and he eventually settled down in Caesarea with his family, including his four unmarried daughters who were prophetesses (21:9). So why did Philip settle in Caesarea? It appears legitimate to conclude that since the conversion of Cornelius there had been a community of believers in the city, where Philip could be of service, and where he could enjoy ecclesial fellowship.

We cannot afford to be dogmatic as to how much of this Julius would be familiar with; but, at the same time, he will have been as fully briefed as possible about Paul and his associates. It is certain, for example, that Julius will have been informed of what Felix had decided: "He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs" (24:23, NIV).

When Julius was made responsible for Paul and the other prisoners, we know that Paul was loosely attached to the centurion by a chain. This



Roman centurion

1. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text* (London, The Tyndale Press, 1966), p. 215.

was still the case when Paul got to Rome, since he mentioned “this chain” to the leaders of the Jews when they came to see and listen to him after his arrival in the capital (28:20). W. S. Montgomery has some helpful information about this when he writes: “Among the Romans, it was customary to attach the prisoner by a light chain to the officer responsible for his custody, whose right hand was thus free. It was to this method of confinement that St. Paul alludes when speaking of his ‘chain’ (Ac. 28:20, Eph. 6:20m, 2 Tim. 1:16).”²

Julius and Paul: a shared experience

Although we cannot be sure about the nature and extent of what Julius knew about Paul’s personal background, we can be certain that he knew that Paul was both a Roman citizen and a Christian, though Julius may not have had much knowledge of the gospel itself. It seems likely, too, that he will have known that Christianity had been established in Caesarea by the conversion of a fellow-centurion. Against this background we can feel comfortable about asserting the facts relating to the experience that Julius and Paul shared together on their journey to Rome.

Throughout the journey they would be chained together—though perhaps on occasions Julius would be replaced by a trusted soldier from his band. But Julius carried the main responsibility for Paul; and he must inevitably have learned a great deal about the apostle, being in his close company for such a long time. Indeed, he will no doubt also have learned about Luke, since the relationship that united them in a common love for the Lord Jesus must have been evident to Julius and his men.

The centurion and his soldiers weathered the same fierce storm as the apostles, and they must have marvelled at the confident demeanour of Paul and his companion. While most of the other passengers were frightened and in despair, Paul and Luke would exhibit a composure which would be incomprehensible to the majority of those on board the ship. And whatever would Julius or his soldiers—or anyone else who heard Paul speak—make of the apostle’s claim that an angel of the God to whom he belonged had stood by him during the night, when he was no doubt chained to Julius or to one of his on-duty soldiers (Acts 27:23,24)? Whatever the reaction of soldiers or fellow-passengers, Paul was not so much preaching the gospel as living it.

Eventually they landed in Malta, and stayed there until conditions so far improved that they

were able to be taken on board a freighter which had prudently wintered on the island. On this vessel the shipwrecked company was able to complete the journey to Puteoli (28:13). After carrying out any necessary business, Julius was able to proceed to Rome. But before he finally arrived there, the centurion was to have a further demonstration of the bonds which united the disciples of Christ, as two parties came out from the capital to welcome Paul and Luke (v. 15).

Paul and Julius in Rome

For the Apostle Paul, the events since leaving Caesarea must have seemed remarkable, and his resilience and devotion to the Lord will have been, if anything, increased and strengthened. He would never forget those reassuring words, “Be of good cheer, Paul: for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome” (23:11). Once suitable arrangements for his accommodation had been made in Rome, he summoned the local Jewish leaders to his rented residence so that he could preach to them what he described in Ephesians 3:8 as “the unsearchable riches of Christ.” He was still a chained prisoner, of course, from which we can conclude that he was still attached to a soldier (Acts 28:16,20)—though this was perhaps no longer Julius; the record does not say.

But how did Julius, who had been responsible for Paul for so many months, including the days of storm and shipwreck—how did he react to all the remarkable events he had shared with Paul? We are not told; but he must have had an extraordinary story to recount to his fellow-officers. He must also have learned a great deal from Paul, in both word and deed, about the Lord Jesus.

As for Paul, the words he wrote later from Rome to Timothy were no empty ones: “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the seed of David, according to my gospel: wherein I suffer hardship unto bonds, as a malefactor; *but the word of God is not bound*” (2 Tim. 2:8,9, RV). Freedom to proclaim the gospel of grace was what the apostle desired above all, and he exploited his opportunities in Rome to the fullest possible extent, even under house arrest (Acts 28:30,31).

[\(To be continued\)](#)

2. Article on ‘Chain, bonds’, in: James Hastings (ed.), *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1915), p. 173.