
PAUL, CORINTH,
and the
ROMAN EMPIRE

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Paul, Corinth, and the Roman Empire
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To

Stanley E. Porter

in admiration, friendship and gratitude

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PREFACE

The Corinthian correspondence has been for long a focal point of scholarly interest and has led a number of scholars to many attempts to reconstruct the situation at Corinth and to see the character of the community. Recent research in the field of Pauline studies has created significant new readings of Paul and his epistles as it has considered him and his epistles in the larger context of the Roman Empire's society, culture, and world. In this regard, scholars are demonstrating a renewed concern in culture, literacy, and education in the ancient Mediterranean world. This book is an attempt to help students to clarify and understand the setting of Paul's letter to the Corinthians in the context of the Roman Empire.

The church communities to whom Paul addressed his letter in Corinth and other epistles were just beginning to work out the congregation relations, celebrations, beliefs, and attitudes toward the larger Roman imperial society that would provide some basis for the expansion of the social movement that later became the Christian church. The letter to the Corinthians gives us a window into the beginning struggles in one seldom controversial community of that movement in one of the most open cosmopolitan cities of the Roman Empire; the congregation the apostle Paul had founded in Corinth. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, particularly 1 Corinthians, gives an exclusively world view of the life of the early Christian communities.

Finally, I acknowledge with grateful thanks the professional assistance of my friend Stanley E. Porter, who encouraged me and suggested many ways to improve the writing of this book. It is our desire that this study will bring to life the Roman Empire background of the first-century Christians at Roman Corinth and help to explain the text of the epistle to the Corinthians for the readers.

Panayotis Coutsoumpos

March 2012



ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABD</i>	Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. D. N. Freedman, 6 vols, New York, 1992
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANEW	<i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt</i>
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BBR	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZ	<i>Biblische Zeitschrift</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	CBQ Monograph Series
CRBS	<i>Current Research in Biblical Studies</i>
EDNT	<i>Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>Exp Tim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>DPL</i>	<i>Dictionary of Paul and His Letters</i>
DNTB	<i>Dictionary of New Testament Background</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
Hermeneia	Hermeneia: a critical and historical commentary on the Bible
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>INT</i>	Interpretation
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JGRChJ</i>	<i>Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LPS	Library of Pauline Studies
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LXX	Septuagint



NTTS	<i>New Testament Theology Series</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
Nov T	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	Supplements to <i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTL	New Testament Library
NTS	<i>New Testamnent Studies</i>
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
NTTh	New Testament Theology
SP	Sacra pagina
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBibL	Studies in Biblical Literature
SBLRBS	Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SNTW	Studies of the New Testament and Its World
SE	<i>Studia Evangelica</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
TynBul	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WGRWSup	Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplement Series
WUNT	<i>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</i>
ZNW	<i>Zietschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

INTRODUCTION

In recent times the area of Pauline studies has created significant new readings of Paul and his epistles as it has considered him and his epistles in the larger context of the Greco-Roman society, culture and world.¹ In this regard, scholars are demonstrating a renewed concern in culture, literacy and education in the ancient Mediterranean world. The research, however, has increased in the past two decades and the emphases of these studies are on social, historical, rhetorical and cultural studies in the New Testament and the Roman Empire.² This unique book makes an important contribution to such studies, and it is also a guide to the context and several issues related to Paul, Roman Corinth and the Roman Empire in the first-century.

The focus will be on ways in which Paul and the Corinthian community interacts with and negotiates with the Roman imperial world, recognizing that the Roman Empire is not merely a “context issue,” but is the chief influence on life style, culture and context in Roman Corinth.

In fact, the Roman Empire dominated the territory and people in the region of the Mediterranean Sea.³ Furthermore, the Corinthians’ congregation, particularly 1 Corinthians, gives a uniquely detailed and vivid portrait of the life of this Christian community and their association with the Roman Empire.⁴ As it is known, the Roman Empire makes available the political framework, economic, societal, and the religious context (including the imperial cult)⁵ for the majority of the people of the Greco-Roman world in the first-century.⁶

In this study I ask the reader to take into account the entire and exact background that stands behind the social interaction of Paul and the believing community in Roman Corinth.⁷ This book is an essential introduction to all the issues involved in exploring what may be known about Paul, Corinth and the Roman Empire and why such knowledge is fundamental to the readers of 1 Corinthians.

Although the report that it is found in the book of Acts gave us a good picture of Corinth, “the most fascinating window on Paul’s ministry



in Corinth comes from his letters to the congregation from 1 and 2 Corinthians.⁸ In this regard, the reasons which led the apostle Paul to write 1 Corinthians are obviously visible in the epistle.⁹ Hence, it is also clear that before writing 1 Corinthians Paul had written to the congregation in Corinth at least once. There are several questions we may consider in our study: What was the situation behind 1 Corinthians? What was Paul's association with the church? How was the apostle received by the Corinthians community at the time of the writing of 1 Corinthians?

All of the above questions have been raised in social-historical investigation on the congregation at Roman Corinth.¹⁰ These questions concern primarily with problems in the church, they are questions which in a sense are associated to theological and social issues in Corinth.¹¹ Theissen observes, however, that “the sociological analysis of theological quarrel does not, in any my opinion, mean reducing it to social factor.”¹²

Paul's letters to the Corinthians, provide important data for the study of the social and theological issues of early Christian teachings under the influence of the Roman Empire. In the time of the apostle Paul, the well known city of Athens was declining in influence when comparing with the new Roman city of Corinth.¹³ The city was ethnically and religiously diverse.¹⁴ Its socio-political foundation was classically hierarchical with small number of elite families controlling the city's power and wealth. There is also considerable inscriptional proof that many artisans and shopkeepers were proud of their work.¹⁵ But the apostle Paul did sometimes work with his hands and would have been seen by many as a common artisan.¹⁶

Particularly, this was the wrong impression that some of the Corinthian's church members have about Paul. This book outlines how the letters to the Corinthians reveal the role of the apostle Paul in shaping relationships within the Christian community and provides a unique picture of a new growing church in a Greco-Roman social environment.



It is clear, however, that there is a social and economic aspect to any religious community, and the Christian community at Roman Corinth is not the exception.¹⁷ Since the 1960s several books have discussed this side of the social life in the early church.¹⁸ Since then many books have been written on the subject that illuminate and has given us a better picture of the composition of some of the church social structure and status in early Christianity. In fact, there are some members of the church at Corinth that were wealthy.

It is significant to note that E. A. Judge refused the identification of the churches, especially the Corinthian church with the poor, but he tried to set them in a real setting of first-century life.¹⁹ As it was common, a church, particularly the Corinthian's congregation, was structured in the same way as a Greco-Roman household.²⁰ The Corinthian congregation was a classical example of how the wealthy, and the poor interacted in the Greco-Roman society.²¹ Hence, the church community at Corinth acted and behaved as any common Roman citizen of the time.

Corinth was known as a wealthy and a luxurious city among the cities in the Roman Empire.²² According to Strabo "Corinth is called "wealthy" because of its commerce, since it is situated on the Isthmus and is master of two harbors, of which the one leads straight to Asia, and the other to Italy: and it makes easy the exchange of merchandise from both countries that are so far distant from each other."²³ This was the social setting of some of the church members at Roman Corinth. In addition, in the 1970s, the German scholar Gerd Theissen in a series of articles, concentrated his studies on the Corinthian correspondence, on which there is the most information, and suggested criteria for discerning social levels in the community.²⁴ Theissen provided evidence that the Corinthian community included rich, educated people as well as poor and illiterate.

He also suggested that it would be the wealthy people who caused the trouble Paul had to deal with in 1 Corinthians, going to court for money, being involved in business dinners with pagan partners and joining in prayers to heathen idols over the meal.²⁵ These business transactions were common among the citizen of the Greco-Roman world and they



became common and part of to some of the church member at Roman Corinth. Theissen's work was original and creative, and it generated much discussion. Some criticisms were made by Wayne Meeks, for example, he says that there is proof of poor farmers going to law for their rights.²⁶

It is not surprising if more independent people are the first to adopt a new creed, but a significant doubt arises over Theissen's view of the weak (the poor) and strong (the wealthy) issues. There are several scholars which do not agree with Theissen's description of the social reality of the Corinthians' congregation. The 1990s have seen further studies of the social context to the Pauline mission in Roman Corinth. In Addition, J. Chow, A. D. Clarke and more recently J. Rice have examined the Roman system of patronage as feature of the Corinthian community.²⁷ Wealthy men such as Erastus and Gaius were patrons of the congregation, providing financial support and a place for the community to meet at Roman Corinth.²⁸

On the other hand, A. C. Mitchell claims that there is no evidence of the wealthy suing the poor.²⁹ In addition, Justin Meggitt has questioned a series of widely held conclusions, such as meat consumption among the poor member of the church at Corinth, and also regarding the social status in the Corinthian community.³⁰ The last issue (meat consumption) is a very important one because is part of the main argument that the apostle Paul was dealing in his letter to the Corinthians. We have to be careful when we examine the Greco-Roman social background even more that about the Jewish culture that is more directly mirrored in our texts.

The following are the chapters that we will consider in this book. Chapter 1 describes an overview of Roman Corinth. Chapter 2 discusses the relationship of Roman Corinth and how this relationship affected the city of Corinth toward the Roman Empire. Clearly, the apostle Paul deals with the relation of the Christian (especially the Corinthians' church) to the pagan Roman Empire.³¹ It is most likely that for the Corinthians Christians, it was easy to adapt freely to the Romans laws, customs and society.



Chapter 3 identifies interaction of the city of Corinth and the powerful Roman Empire. Chapter 4 examines the community, the apostle and the social setting. Chapter 5 deals with Paul's ministry and its mission at Roman Corinth. Chapter 6 considers the most important issues and tries to answer some of the critical question that surrounds the epistle. Chapter 7 looks at the main theological issues and contributions of 1 Corinthians. Although I am aware that there is much more that could have been included in this study, I wish that this book will provide students and others interested in Paul, Corinth, and the Roman Empire with some insides into the series of aspects and current studies and issues that underlies present-day discussions.

The main purpose of the book is to introduce the readers to these areas that sometimes seem unapproachable because normally some of this information only appears in advance studies and monographs that deal with the Greco-Roman culture and society in the first-century.

No doubt there is a need in the seminaries and universities for learning more about the world (Greco-Roman world) of the New Testament to avoid erroneous interpretations of the text, particularly, 1 Corinthians. The stimulus for this book came from the students and the aim is to benefit the students of the Bible to a better understanding of the influence of the Greco-Roman culture and society into early Christianity.



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- ²Ben Witherington, *The Paul Quest: The Renewed Search for the Jew of Tarsus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 90. "Literacy and literary ability are seen as significant clues to the social level of this or that person or group. The work of classicists, ancient historian and literary scholars is finally being given due notice by some New Testament scholars."
- ³Richard A. Horley, *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 34. Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 3. "The empire was very hierarchical, with vast disparities of power and wealth."
- ⁴David G. Horrell and Edward Adams, "The Scholarly Quest for Paul's Church at Corinth: A Critical Survey." In *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church*. Edited by E. Adams and David G. Horrell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 1. "The particular preoccupations of scholars, and the ways in which they have sought to explain the character and dispute of the first Corinthians Christians, have varied very widely over time."
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- ¹²Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 123.
- ¹³Grant, *Paul in the Roman*, 13.
- ¹⁴Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 56.
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- ¹⁶Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul's Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 37ff.



- ¹⁷David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interest and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*. SNTW (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 64-73.
- ¹⁸Michael D. Goulder, *Paul and the Competing Mission in Corinth* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 268-70. See also David G. Horrell, *An Introduction to the Study of Paul* (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 106-112. He point out that "until relatively recently, the subject of Paul's relationship to the Roman Empire was somewhat neglected, especially compared with the dominant (and important) topic of Paul's relationship to Judaism." See also John K. Chow, *Patronage and Power*, 12-14.
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- ²²Charles B. Puskas and Mark Reasoner, *The Letters of Paul: An Introduction* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013), 89-90.
- ²³Strabo, *Geography* 8.6.20-23.
- ²⁴Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 15.
- ²⁵David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 365. "Sacrifice was the customary form of both public and private worship in ancient world." See also Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 173-217.
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- ³¹Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*. Translated by M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 356. "The Romans are beginning to perceive the Christians as a group that worships an executed criminal as a god and that proclaims the imminent end of the world. The Neronian persecution that occurred only eight years after Romans was written shows that there must have been increasing tensions between the Christians, on the one side, and the authorities and the population of Rome, on the other."



CHAPTER I

ROMAN CORINTH: AN OVERVIEW

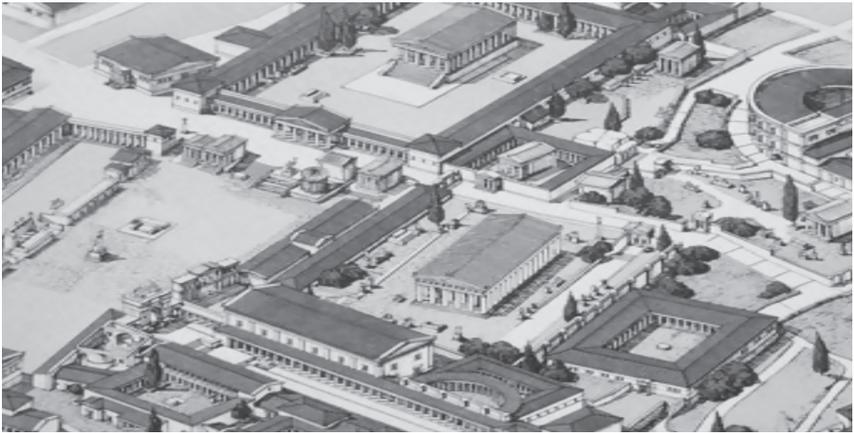


Figure 1. Roman Corinth, its Architecture and City Administration.

Introduction

It is now a well-established assumption within New Testament studies that the apostle Paul wrote the first epistle to the Corinthians, and that it was written from Ephesus.³² In addition, scholars are almost united in believing that Paul's important progress took place in the beginning part of his ministry³³ and that the epistles are from the later part of his career. In addition, the apostle Paul was impressed. to write 1 Corinthians in response to alarming news from the church.³⁴

There is no indication that the apostle Paul was driven out of Athens either by the mob (Jewish agitators) or by the authorities. He simply



left the city of Athens and went to Corinth, which was the capital of the Roman province of Greece, known as Achaia.³⁵ There were some Jews in Corinth (such as Aquila and Priscilla) that were expelled from Rome. It is worth noting that the Jews in Rome were divided into some district synagogues, rather than congregated in a single community. The earliest and almost surely the biggest, of the congregations were in the area called Transtiberian, on the west part of the Tiber.³⁶

For the most part, the Jews kept their ancient traditions and institutions in the Diaspora and some of them were slow to be integrated into the secular Greco-Roman way of life.³⁷ There is a disagreement over the date of the expulsion of the Jews from Rome and the arrival of Paul according to Acts 18:2 at Corinth. The account in Acts 18:2 says that Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome; is it difficult to accept. The account of Paul's initial visit to Corinth in Acts 18 gives some historical clues.³⁸ However, some interpreters connect the expulsion with the emperor's effort to pacify the Jewish community during the first year of his reign.³⁹

Paul's Visit to Corinth

Luke also mentions an imperial edict of A.D. 49 when Claudius expelled a number of Jews from Rome.⁴⁰ Dio Cassius also mentions an edit regarding the Jews in Rome earlier in the Claudian reign (A.D. 41).⁴¹ This, however, does not specially refer to any expulsion from the city. The inquiry is raised as to whether the Suetonius and Dio Cassius reports two different edicts or whether these are different report of the same historical incident.



Figure 2. The Head of Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus.

“Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, pontifex maximus, holding the tribunician power, proclaims: . . . Therefore it is right that also the Jews, who are in all the world under us, shall maintain their ancestral customs without hindrance and to them I now also command to use this my kindness rather reasonably and not to despise the religious rites of the other nations, but to observe their own laws.” Edict of Claudius on Jewish Rights, 41 AD.

Suetonius records an expulsion of Jewish agitators (confused with Christians) but gives



no date.⁴² Hence, the date found in Acts seems to be the most reliable information we have about the expulsion of the Jews from Rome. On the contrary, Lüdermann argues for an earlier date and has the apostle Paul meet Aquila and Priscilla in Corinth in 41.⁴³

Some interpreters, however, favor the later date, considering Aquila and Priscilla came shortly before the apostle Paul in 49/50.⁴⁴ Luke begins his report of Paul's visit to Roman Corinth with the expressions: "After this he left Athens and went to Corinth. And he found a Jew named Aquila and his wife Priscilla, a native of Pontius."⁴⁵ In other words, Luke records that Paul's arrival in Corinth followed quickly on that of Aquila and Priscilla and the edict of Claudius. Luke also mentions only two visits of the apostle Paul to Corinth.

Paul and the Edict of Claudius

As mentioned above, Luke mentions that Aquila and Priscilla arrived a little earlier than Paul,⁴⁶ whose presence in Corinth is made clear by Claudius's decree. It is interesting to observe that Suetonius mentions that the emperor gave this decree: *Iudeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit*,⁴⁷ according to Claudius, the Jews were expelled from Rome because they were creating disturbances in the name of Chrestus.



Figure 3. Mural of the Jews' Expulsion from Rome by Claudius.