

Dear Joan,

Thank you for your email. The important thing, especially in these days, is that we should have our eyes on Jesus and seek to know how he wants us to walk before Him. This really should be the priority. Whatever else Romans 14 may be saying, it has to do with how we should treat each other. In regard to interpretation we (I) should be humble and realise that we(I) don't have the complete picture. But you are right in your observation that the historical context is important, actually crucial, to interpretation. The so-called Edict of Claudius resulted in an expulsion of Jews from Rome in some way, and this has been understood as key to understanding Romans. Luke says,

**Acts 18:2** *And he [Paul] found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome.*

F.F. Bruce interprets Romans through the lens of the Claudius Edict, as do many others. He writes that in its earliest stages Roman Christianity was thoroughly Jewish, and at this stage the Roman authorities would not have been able to distinguish Christians from Jews. In other words, Christianity was still a sect of Judaism.

It is believed that the Jews were expelled because of tensions between the Jews and Christians. This is deduced from a statement of Suetonius (an historian), "because the Jews of Rome were indulging in constant riots at the instigation of *Chrestus* he expelled them from the city." *Chrestus*, although not spelt as *Christ*, or *Christians*, is broadly understood to be a reference to Christians.

According to this theory, after the expulsion of Jews and Jewish Christians in 49AD, things began to change in Rome, Gentiles became dominant in the church, and Christianity began to emerge as a separate religion, in particular free from the law, especially the ceremonial law. Romans 14 therefore reflects tensions between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians who had returned back to Rome after the death of Claudius in 54AD. The Gentile Christians were not to judge the Jewish Christians who are still in bondage to the law, but to *welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for passing judgment over disputable matters.*

However I think the evidence for the Claudius Edict is flimsy. It can be considered doubtful if *Chrestus* really is a reference to Christians. But most importantly, it is surprising that an incident of such magnitude, which supposedly produced such hostility between Jews and Christians in Rome, isn't even mentioned when Paul arrives in Rome in Acts 28. In fact, the Jews of Rome aren't hostile towards Paul, and 'Christianity' is described as a 'sect' (i.e. it is still part of Judaism), and the Jewish leaders seem to be relatively unaware of it anyway.

**Acts 28:22** *But we desire to hear from you what your views are, for with regard to this sect we know that everywhere it is spoken against."*

The problem with the Edict of Claudius theory is that it puts an irreversible hostility and separation between the Jewish and Christian communities, which seems to be the one thing Paul is seeking to overcome. Interpreting Romans 14:1 in the light of this theory, Jews who convert to Christianity should in effect become Gentiles, to become strong and mature. Historically this is how the church has evangelised Jews. However it is quite contrary to Paul's teaching in 1Cor 7:18, *Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised (Jewish)? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision (not be Jewish). Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised (Gentile)? Let him not seek circumcision (become Jewish).*

What I am saying is that the separation and distinguishing features of Christianity (e.g. meeting on Sunday's, eating non-Kosher) only emerged later (for some much later) than Paul's letter to Rome. Acts 28:22 strongly suggests that at the time of writing, the Christians in Rome were still a sect within Judaism and functioning within the legal bounds (according to Roman Law) of the synagogues.

My main point last Sunday was just to show that the weak in faith in Romans itself are identified as those in unbelief in relation to Jesus as Messiah (Romans 4, 5:6); and more widely in Scripture the weak or stumbling or powerless (all words Paul uses) are identified as those in unbelief. Therefore it is reasonable to conclude that the weak in faith in Romans 14 are the not-yet-believing in Jesus Jews who have been in the background of Paul's thought all the way back from Romans 9. I also tried to apply this to show that the Lord wants to strengthen us day by day in our walk with Him.

The idea that the weak in faith in Romans 14 are Jewish Christians who still needed to shake off the bondage of the Torah (esp. Sabbath and dietary laws) fits well with the anti-Torah, (anti-Semitic) bias and rhetoric introduced during the period of the church fathers; but I don't think it fits in well with the original context. I think if we read carefully we will see that Paul wasn't talking about the Biblical food laws or Sabbath or Festivals at all.

God bless,

Nick