

@ Home @ Rome – how the Romans did church, and who were they anyway?

People crowded through the congested city lanes. They passed religious processions and sacrifices, festival arrays and weddings, funerals, masquerades, graffiti and edicts on the walls. Life is lived on the streets. Scribes and tinkers fill the recesses, town criers and soapbox orators the corners. Dogs lick up the garbage. Hawkers push their carts. A Latin writer commented cynically that there was noise all night, carts creaking through narrow winding streets and the curses of drivers caught in the traffic. Rented houses were squalid, noisy, expensive and cold, with no running water and no toilet.

A description¹ of 1st century Rome, although perhaps 21st century Rome still has the traffic problems! This was the Rome, inhabited by real people, Romans, to whom Paul's great letter is addressed. Sometimes we can forget that!

Paul addresses his letter to 'all God's beloved in Rome who are called to be saints' (Rom. 1:7). He is writing probably from Corinth, somewhere between 54 and 58CE, to people in a city he has never been to (Rom. 1:10, 13, 15; 15:22ff), and yet in the final chapter 16, he is able to greet 28 people in the church at Rome by name!

Perhaps that is a reminder to us that even in the first years of the Christian church's existence, rather than there being just isolated pockets of believers, there was in fact a fair degree of communication and mobility running between them all, if Paul's own missionary journeys are anything to go by. The Roman Empire, while not always favourable to Christians, at least provided them with good roads and security of communication, trade and travel routes, such that first century Christianity has been described as "the Holy Internet"² – a network of interconnected groups.

Who founded the church at Rome? That's one of those million dollar questions to which tradition gives a number of answers. Yes, we know the church traditions that both Peter and Paul spent time living in Rome and that both were martyred c.64CE during the persecution of the Emperor Nero.

But we can go back further than that to Luke's account of the day of Pentecost where we're told that among the crowd were 'visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes' (Acts 2:10). It seems that some of those who became Christians at that time took their newfound faith back to Rome with them, for we have no biblical record of an apostolic founder, and indeed Paul is at pains to acknowledge this (Rom. 15:20).

What are we talking about when we say 'the church at Rome'? What does it mean when in chapter 16 Paul greets 'the church that meets at the house of Priscilla and Aquila' (Rom.16:3-5)? The word Paul uses for church is *ekklēsia*, the word used for an assembly or gathering of people. It would have had resonance for those of Jewish background as it was the Greek translation in the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, for the Hebrew word *qahal*, the assembly of the people of Israel before God (Deut 4:10). But *ekklēsia* would also be familiar to Greek-speaking Romans to indicate any assembly of citizens meeting for political or civic purposes (e.g. Acts 19:39 in Ephesus).

Note that we are talking about an assembly that meets in a house or home, so of necessity we are talking of the number who could fit into a Roman house, probably the house of a patron with some means, so most likely a maximum of twenty to thirty people. It seems that at the time of Paul's writing, there were about 5 such house-churches in Rome: 1) the house of Priscilla and Aquila; those who belong to the households of 2) Aristobulus and 3) Narcissus; 4) Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermēs, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers and sisters who are with them; and 5) Philologus, Julia, Nēreus and his sister, Olympas and all the saints who are with them. (Rom 16:10-11, 14-16). So the church at Rome may well consist of c. 100 to 150 people in total.

¹ Beulah Wood, *The People Paul admired: the house church leaders of the New Testament* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), p.117.

² See M. Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation", in Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for all Christians* (Eerdmans, 1998), p.49-70.

Patron-client relationships were an established part of Roman society: wealthy patrons would have a number of 'clients' they would look after, who in turn owed them loyalty. These clients may well in turn have clients below them in a long chain of relationships with reciprocal responsibilities. It is possible that some of the patrons who hosted house-churches were not in fact Christian themselves but were the heads of great houses in Rome where some Christians, perhaps slaves, lived. For example, Narcissus (Rom 16:11) may have been the Narcissus who was a favourite of the Emperor Claudius and who took his own life after Claudius' death in 54CE, it seems his household may have continued on in some form³.

We need to remind ourselves that Christians are meeting in homes, as Christianity will not be granted legal status until the early 4th century under the Emperor Constantine. We don't start seeing church buildings until the 3rd century when some were adapted from the larger house churches. Some of the names of the patron householders are carried on in the *tituli* churches in Rome today e.g. the churches of St Clement built over a 1st century house, and St Pudentiana, named for the daughter of a Roman senator Pudens.

How were Christians viewed in Roman society?

Back in the time of the Romans epistle, in the 50sCE, Christianity enjoyed a somewhat protected status by being seen as a subset of Judaism. Judaism had a level of acceptance in polytheistic Rome by its status as an ethnic religion with adherents who sought to be seen as loyal Roman citizens. It's thought there were about 40,000 Jews in Rome in the 1st century, about 5% of the population of Rome. We know of at least 11 synagogues and 3 Jewish burial catacombs⁴.

But from time to time, there were flare-ups that affected Jews and consequently Christians. For example, the Roman historian Suetonius says that in the reign of the Emperor Claudius, in 49CE riots broke out among the Jews at the instigation of a certain Chrestus, and as a result the Jews were expelled from Rome. It's likely that Chrestus is a variant spelling of Christus, and maybe what is being referred to here is evidence of tensions between Christians and Jews within the synagogues where Jewish Christians till then had sheltered. It may be that at this time, Christians left the synagogues and began to meet solely in house churches. The book of Acts tells us that Aquila and Prisca were among those Jewish Christians exiled from Rome. They moved to Corinth where they met Paul (Acts 18:1-3); by the time of the Romans epistle, they are back in Rome (Rom 16:3), presumably when things had calmed down again.

There's another reason why Christians were able to meet in house churches with a fair degree of tolerance from Roman society. This was because these gatherings seemed not too dissimilar from the voluntary associations, clubs and guilds which met in Rome, a little like today's Rotary clubs and masonic lodges! There were three kinds of these⁵, often called in Latin *collegia*, firstly, professional guilds of those who worked in a common trade or business. Each guild would choose a god to preside over their meetings as patron deity and to receive sacrifices at their banquets. The meat from such a sacrifice was then shared by the members as part of the banquet. You'll recall Paul addresses the scruples of Christians about eating meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8, and this may also be the background of Paul's teaching to the Romans about 'the strong' and 'the weak' not judging each other in Romans 14-15:1. It's possible that some Christian house churches also consisted of those who worked together in similar occupations or roles.

The second of the *collegia* were the *collegia sodalicia*, groups devoted to the worship of specific gods. They were often groups of foreigners who kept up devotion to the god of their home territory. You can see how Jewish synagogues and Christian house churches could both be taken to be *collegia* of this sort.

The third group were the *collegia tenuiorum*, who were clubs of the poor who formed societies and paid a subscription to provide funeral rites and a decent burial, and meanwhile enjoyed a monthly common meal together! It's interesting that both Jews and Christians (e.g. Tertullian, 3rd c.) at various times argued that they were such groups and so deserved protection and freedom of assembly. Both pagan and Christian Romans built small outdoor dining rooms near their tombs, an interesting form of al fresco dining!

³ Tom Wright, Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 2: Chapters 9-16 (London:SPCK, 2004), p. 132

⁴ John Stambaugh & David Balch, The New Testament in its social environment. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 162.

⁵ Ibid. p. 125

In due course for Christians, these became shrines for those who had died a martyr's death – eucharistic meals were often held at the shrine, and eventually it became common practice for the martyr's relics to be placed under the altar on which the eucharistic meal was set, a practice long continued in the church.

Just who were the Christian members of house churches, how much did they reflect their society?

I've already mentioned those who were Christians from a Jewish background, it seems likely that most of these were Hellenistic Jews, and so Greek speaking. Paul's colleagues and patrons seem to come from the upper social levels of Hellenistic Judaism, while many of his converts seem to be wealthy Gentiles who had been attached to the Jewish community as proselytes or God-fearers. Educated Romans of the upper classes with an education in Greek would have no trouble feeling at home in the Hellenistic environment of the church at Rome. Upper class women were attracted to Christianity for the higher status they could have than in Graeco-Roman society, enhanced by the house church context being in the private domain, where they already wielded considerable authority. Indeed, it is likely that women patrons acted as host at the church's common meal, and so presided at the eucharist, just as male patrons would do in their role as host.

It's interesting that it's only in the 2nd century CE that we find many lower-class Romans joining the church, those who did not speak Greek and therefore would need a translation of the New Testament into Latin. However one of the stand-out characteristics of the house church (as compared to the mostly socially homogenous *collegia*) was its egalitarian nature, as revealed by the presence of freedmen/women and slaves. Freedmen and women had low formal status in society, but were often wealthy, influential and educated. Slaves were often members of households who converted to Christianity along with their owner. Here we see enacted Paul's reminder to the Galatians that among the baptised 'there is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

Later writings in the New Testament, particularly the *Haustafeln* or household codes of Colossians 3-4, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2 and 1 Peter 3, advocate a more patriarchal ordering of the family, patterned more closely on the traditional Graeco-Roman family, perhaps showing how easy it was for the radical egalitarianism of Jesus' and Paul's early teaching to slide into conforming to local norms in an attempt to fit in and not rock the boat.

How were Christians viewed by the Roman authorities?

This not rocking the boat was also evident in Paul's injunctions to the Romans to be loyal to the state, to respect those in authority and to pay their taxes and revenue (Rom 13:1-7). Christians like Jews were vulnerable in that they refused to offer sacrifices to the gods who were seen to protect the state, or to take part in the cult of emperor worship. Their desire to convert Gentiles to Christianity was also seen as a threat to their converts' loyalty to the emperor and the state. Hence Paul's encouragement for those who were patrons and benefactors to continue their public support for the state, and so model good citizenship.

This was particularly necessary in the light of occasional persecution of Christians, now being singled out from the protective covering of being Jews. The first of these was the celebrated occasion of Nero scapegoating the Christians for the great fire at Rome in 64CE. Christians were thrown to the wild beasts in the circus, nailed to crosses or burned alive to serve as nightly illumination in the city. The Roman historian Tacitus called Christianity 'a deadly superstition' but also said that the tortures inflicted on Christians were so grim that the people of Rome felt compassion for them and resented Nero's cruelty, backfiring on him.

How did Christians worship in their house-churches?⁶

It seems likely that Christian worship was first modelled on synagogue worship, with readings from the Hebrew Scriptures supplemented by Christian writings (such as letters circulated by Paul and others), and prayer in the name of Jesus. No doubt Psalms were still sung, with the addition of Christian hymns, such as the hymn to Christ which Paul quotes in Philippians 2:5-11.

Synagogue worship too influenced the layout of the worship space: there was seating for the officiants, while most people stood, apart from the elderly or infirm.

⁶ Much of this section is sourced from Education for Ministry, Common Lessons, section 7 The Sanctification of Time and Life.

There was a raised platform (bema) for scripture reading and preaching, which became a reading desk, in Greek *ambo*, the forerunner of our lectern and pulpit.

The earliest written evidence we have about the life of the church at Rome is from the early 3rd century, the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (170-235), written about 215CE but based on earlier church traditions of perhaps the middle of the second century. While it reflects a more developed ordering of ministry with liturgy led by bishops, presbyters and deacons, it sheds light on worship as it evolved in the church at Rome. It describes two daily congregational meetings: in the mornings there was an assembly for 'instruction on the Word of God', and prayer before going to work. In the evenings, there was a service of light called *lucernarium*. A deacon brought a lamp, and the bishop gave thanks for the light that Jesus had brought to their lives, and for the light that now illuminated the evening darkness. Then after an evening meal, psalms were recited and the Scriptures read.

The Eucharist was celebrated every Sunday. On Sunday morning the people would gather in the assembly room of the house church, and engage in conversation until the person appointed began to read from the Scriptures. The readings were often lengthy (compared with our short lectionary readings!), perhaps an entire book from the Hebrew Scriptures or the whole of a letter from a Christian writer. The bishop seated in his chair at the front of the gathering would then preach and interpret the readings, with the people sitting on the floor or one of the few chairs.

After this, the catechumens (those preparing for baptism) and any penitents who were not yet able to receive communion were dismissed. Then prayers were offered, led by a deacon giving biddings to guide the people's prayers. This completed the service of the word, and the people greeted each other with the kiss of peace.

The deacons then circulated among the people, gathering up their offerings of bread and wine, and often other foods as well, for example, olives, olive oil and cheese, symbols of the first fruits offered to God in thanksgiving. They would also be used later for the agape fellowship meal, and to distribute to the poor and the clergy!

There is a wonderful prayer of blessing for the cheese and the olives:

Sanctify this milk which has solidified and solidify us in your love, and let not your sweetness depart from this fruit of the olive tree, which is a type of your mercy which you caused to flow from the Tree for life to those who hope in you. Glory to you, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit in the holy church both now and always and world without end. Amen.

The deacons then put a table in the centre of the room and spread it with a cloth. Bread and wine for the eucharist were put on the table. The bishop, with the presbyters on either side of him, stood at the table with the congregation gathered round. All the people joined the bishop in raising their hands in the gesture of prayer (*orans*) as the bishop prayed the prayer of thanksgiving. The bishop thus presided, as the whole people of God celebrated the eucharist together.

I thought I'd share with you the eucharistic prayer of Hippolytus, as it shows us both the similarities and the differences from those of our own day. The beginning, the *Sursum Corda*, will be very familiar to you:

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Presider: The Lord be with you | People: And with your spirit. |
| Lift up your hearts | They are lifted to the Lord |
| Let us give thanks to the Lord. | It is worthy and just. |

We give you thanks, O God, through your beloved Child Jesus Christ, whom in the last times you sent to us, a Saviour and Redeemer and Messenger of your will, who is your Word, inseparable from you; through whom you made all things and whom, in your good pleasure, you sent from heaven into the womb of a virgin, and who, conceived within her, was made flesh, and was manifested as your Son, born of the Holy Spirit and a virgin; who, fulfilling your will, and winning for you a holy people, spread out his hands when he suffered, that by his passion he might set free those who believe in you; who, when he was given over to his voluntary suffering, that he might destroy death and break the bonds of the devil, and tread hell under foot, and

enlighten the righteous, and set up a boundary post, and manifest the resurrection, taking bread and giving thanks to you said, Take, eat, this is my body, which is broken for you. In the same manner, also, the cup, saying, This is my blood, which is poured out for you. When you do this, you make remembrance (anamnēsis) of me.

Therefore, remembering his death and resurrection, we offer to you the bread and the cup, giving thanks to you because you have counted us worthy to stand before you and to minister as priests to you.

And we pray you to send your Holy Spirit upon the oblation (offering) of the holy church, gathering into one all who receive the holy mysteries, that we may be filled with the Holy Spirit, to the confirmation of faith in truth, that we may praise and glorify you, through your Child Jesus Christ, through whom be glory and honour to you, with the Holy Spirit in the holy church, both now and world without end. Amen.

The people would shout Amen to ratify the prayer. The bishop and attending clergy would receive the bread and wine, then the members of the congregation came forward to receive as well. Each person would go first to the bishop to receive a piece of the loaf and then to one of the other clergy for a sip from the cup. When all had received the deacons took some of the bread (and possibly wine) to the homes of any who couldn't attend the gathering. Sometimes the people took some of the bread home, they were to eat a piece of it each morning before touching any other food, thus extending the eucharist through the week.

An interesting variation of this developed in Rome as the church increased in size and bishops delegated their presiding role to presbyters. The custom of 'commixture' grew. When the bishop celebrated the eucharist, he put aside some of the consecrated bread to be distributed round the congregations of the city. Then when the presbyter celebrated the eucharist in a house church, they would put a piece of bread from the bishop's eucharist into the cup at the time of the fraction, the breaking of the bread, thus linking their eucharist with that of the bishop. This practice was also called 'fermentum', literally the yeast or leaven that spread through the church, and is thought to be the origin of churches being 'in communion' with each other.

Originally it seemed that the eucharist was celebrated as part of a communal meal. Hippolytus does not use the term "agape meal" for the eucharist, though Tertullian in the early 3rd century still does. The connection between such communal meals and the Eucharist had virtually ceased by the time of Cyprian mid 3rd century, when the Eucharist was celebrated fasting in the morning and the agape meal in the evening.

Who were some of the Christians whom Paul greets in Romans 16?

'Romans 16 paints a vivid and lively picture of a church in which women and men minister together, where the gifts of all are cherished and valued, where there do not seem to be rigid distinctions or hierarchies. It is a picture faithful to the insight of Galatians 3:28, where there are no divisions on the grounds of gender'⁷. Such is the view of a book written this year in the UK, in the light of the Church of England's discussions about the ordination of women as bishops.

While a list of greetings does not a theology make, or an ecclesiology, it is still salutary to hear about some of Paul's colleagues, particularly in the light of some of the other statements about women's ministry (or inappropriateness to minister) attributed to Paul in the New Testament. Here I focus on just five of them.

PHOEBE (Romans 16:1-2)

Phoebe's name was one of the names of the goddess Diana, and this would suggest that she was a Gentile convert to Christianity from paganism, not from Judaism.

Phoebe is the first Christian woman recorded to hold the office of a deacon in the church, and this was at Cenchreae, the eastern seaport of Corinth. There is a later church here dedicated to St Phoebe. Note the Greek word 'diakonos' is used of Phoebe with no feminine ending – she is not a deaconess. At that time the word 'deacon' connoted an extremely high standard of service, skill at perceiving needs and resources, an ability to negotiate and enable things to happen with speed, and trustworthiness.

⁷ Stephen Croft & Paula Gooder (eds), *Women and Men in Scripture and the Church*, (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2013) p. 29

In Romans 16:1 we see that Paul is writing a commendation for Phoebe; it seems likely that she is the carrier and interpreter of Paul's letter to the Roman church, and he commends her to them for hospitality with them while she is residing in Rome. They are also asked to assist her in whatever way she needs, so she would find herself surrounded with the love of the Christian community. Paul tells us that Phoebe had been a great help to many, including himself. The word used here '*prostatis*' means a patron or benefactor, someone who stood by people with moral, social and financial support. Phoebe was most likely wealthy, and it seems Paul had benefited from her patronage and protection. She is in a position to travel (so probably a widow and the head of her own household) and to conduct Paul's affairs at Rome, possibly to make preparations for Paul's intended mission to Spain and to gain support for him, she may have had the right imperial connections. 'Prostatis' can also mean leader or governor or presider. Justin Martyr used the term to indicate the person presiding at the eucharist. It has been suggested that Rom. 16:2 could be translated "She has been ordained, even by me, as an officer over many." Anachronistic? Perhaps only in terminology.

PRISCILLA and AQUILA (Acts 18, Romans 16:3, 1 Cor. 16, 2 Timothy 4)

Priscilla and her husband Aquila were Jewish converts to Christianity. They were both tentmakers, and Paul, also a tentmaker by trade, stayed with them in Corinth (Acts 18:3). Priscilla and Aquila must have spent hours discussing spiritual and theological matters with Paul as they sat making tents. As mentioned, it appears that Priscilla and Aquila were amongst a group of Jews expelled from Rome in AD49 by the Emperor Claudius, possibly because they were Christians (Acts 18:2). This means they came to Corinth as refugees, yet we see no note of bitterness, only continued involvement in the church. It seems that Priscilla and Aquila had no sooner settled in Corinth, than they move on with Paul (Acts 18:18,19). He leaves them in Ephesus, responsible for the young church there, and we find a house-church meets in their home (1 Cor. 16:19).

Priscilla and Aquila invite Apollos into their home (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos was a gifted teacher who knew about John's baptism but this was now twenty-five years after the death of John the Baptist, and Apollos needed to know more about Jesus. Priscilla and Aquila obviously got the right balance of approach to Apollos so they were heard by him. It is interesting to note that Priscilla is mentioned first in this teaching role - this suggested to John Chrysostom (4th century) that Priscilla took the lead in teaching Apollos. In four of the six references to this couple in the New Testament, Priscilla is mentioned first - this is highly unusual in antiquity.

At some time Prisca and Aquila had risked their lives for Paul, and his gratitude to them is noted in Romans 16:3. By this time Prisca and Aquila have moved back to Rome. Later they returned again to Ephesus (2 Tim 4:19)

So Priscilla and Aquila were very significant missionaries and leaders in the early church, with an effective and widespread ministry which included teaching and leading house churches. Nothing suggests that Priscilla was simply the woman supporting Aquila who did all the work - rather Priscilla was an important leader and teacher in the early church in her own right. Paul acknowledges her as a co-worker (Rom. 16:3), the same word he uses of leaders like Mark, Timothy, Titus, Apollos and Luke. It seems that later on Priscilla's position in the early church came under suppression - in later manuscripts Aquila's name is placed before hers or without hers. It has also been suggested that Priscilla could have been the author of the anonymous Letter to the Hebrews.

ANDRONICUS AND JUNIA (Romans 16: 7)

Some Bible versions read "Greet Andronicus and Junias, men of note among the apostles." But it is thought that the man Junias is actually a woman Junia. John Chrysostom in the 4th century said "Greet Andronicus and **Junia**... How great the wisdom and devotion of this woman must have been that she was even deemed worthy of the title of apostle." Origen, Ambrose and Jerome agreed that this was a woman; it's only in the 13th century that the name became masculine in the Bible. The King James Version of the Bible has Junia, as does the NRSV version.

So it's likely Paul intended it to be the common woman's name Junia, and not a male name Junias which has never been found anywhere else. A bit like if we'd changed Mary in the Bible into Murray – there are plenty of Marys but no Murrays in the Bible!

It seems likely that Andronicus and Junia were husband and wife, and they are both acknowledged by Paul as apostles. Note that there are different uses of the word 'apostle' in the NT - not just the 12 apostles, but also people like Paul and Barnabas, and Junia and Andronicus join them as those called to the tasks of evangelism, church planting and missionary work. Considering the high esteem Paul has for this role of apostle and his vigorous defence of his own sharing in that role, the tribute paid to Andronicus and Junia as apostles is very high indeed, and one of very considerable significance for the involvement of women in the early Christian mission.

Note too that they were in Christ before Paul - this suggests that they were among the earliest Palestinian Christians and may have been Christians for at least 20 years by the time Paul wrote to them in Rome. It's even been suggested⁸ that Junia can be identified with Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, mentioned in Luke 8: 3, "Joanna" being her Jewish name, and "Junia" her Roman name.

Time to stop – but I hope this has served as some introduction to the life of the church at Rome to whom the epistle to the Romans was written, and to some of the fascinating characters who were leaders and members of the church of the first generation.

I leave the last word to Ignatius of Antioch who on his way to martyrdom at Rome in 110CE described the Roman church in this way: 'those in the place of the region of the Romans, worthy of God, worthy of honour, worthy of congratulation, worthy of praise, worthy of success, worthy in purity, pre-eminent in love, walking in the law of Christ, and bearing the Father's name'⁹.

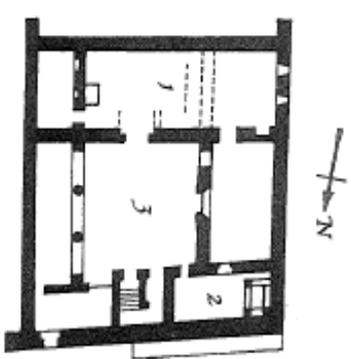
Jenny Wilkens
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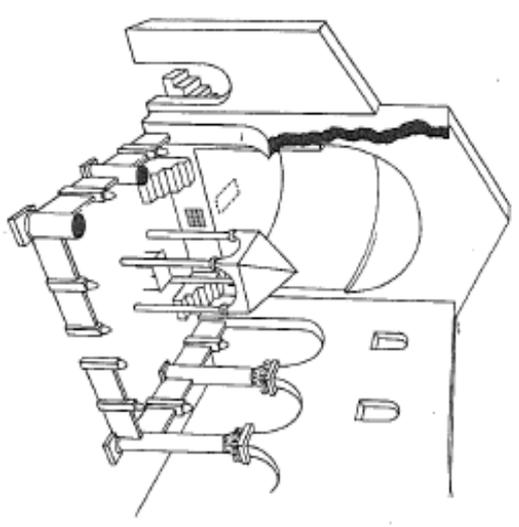
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⁸ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women : Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels*. (Eerdmans, 2002).

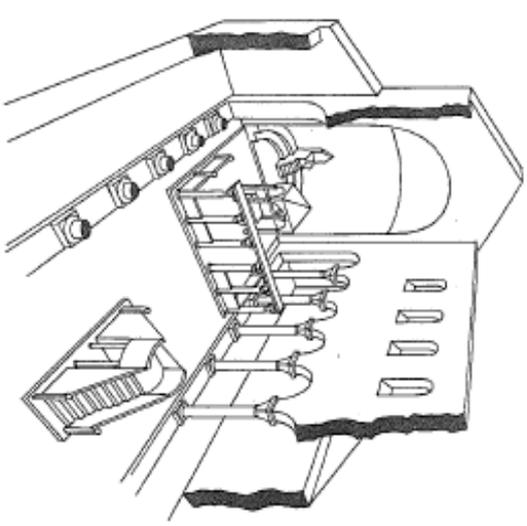
⁹ Preface of Ignatius' *Letter to the Romans*, cited in FF Bruce, *Romans (Tyndale NT Commentary)*(Leicester: IVP, 1985), p.20



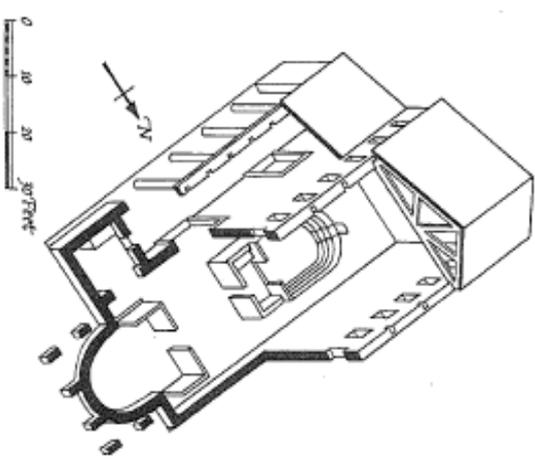
1 Plan of Dura Europos House Church
 1 Eucharistic Assembly Room with dais at east end
 2 Baptistry
 3 Open courtyard



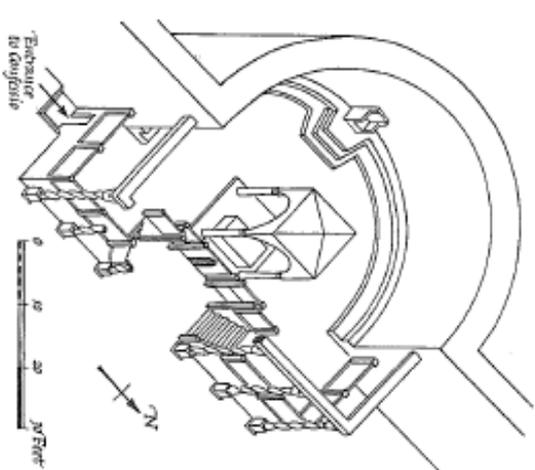
2 Liturgical layout of a fifth-century African basilica



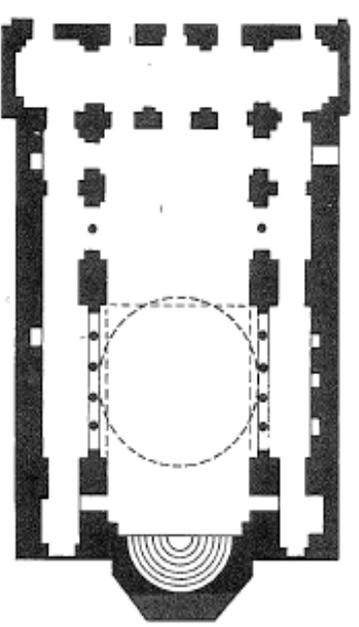
3 Liturgical layout of a sixth-century Greek basilica



4 Fifth-century Syrian basilica



5 St Peter's, Rome, c. 600
 Reconstruction of altar and Confessio by J. B. Ward-Perkins



6 H. Eirene, Constantinople, as in the sixth century
 From Thomas F. Mathews, *Early Churches of Constantinople*
 (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA 16802, 1971)