

August 3, 2003
St. Salome the Myrrh-Bearer

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Aquila and his wife Prisca were tentmakers, originally from Pontus. When we first meet them, maybe in the winter of 49/50, they have recently arrived at Corinth from Rome. Luke tells us that they had departed from the capital because of a decree of the Emperor Claudius against the Jews (Acts 18:1-3), an edict also mentioned by other ancient sources. For example, some decades later the historian Suetonius wrote, "Because the Jews were continuously making disturbances, instigated by Chrestus, [Claudius] expelled them from Rome" (*Lives of the Caesars*, "Claudius" 25.4).

Although Luke says that Claudius "commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome" (Acts 18:2), and Suetonius uses the verb "expelled" (*expulit*), it appears that Rome had no shortage of Jews within the next few years. Perhaps these peremptory expressions of Luke and Suetonius should be understood in a broader and looser sense. It may be the case that Claudius simply forbade the Jews in Rome to assemble in public. This interpretation of the decree corresponds, in fact, to the testimony of Dio Cassius, who wrote somewhat later, "With respect to the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that because of their multitude it would have been difficult, without starting an uproar, to keep them out of the city, [Claudius] did not expel them, but he commanded them, while adhering to the form of life inherited from their fathers (*patrio bio*), not to hold meetings" (*History* 60.6). Such a prohibition, by putting an end to the regular synagogue services at Rome, would severely restrict observant Jewish life. Large numbers would have departed rather than be deprived of their regular synagogue worship. Perhaps this was the reason that the decree was popularly interpreted as a forced exile of the Jews from the capital city, an interpretation reflected in Luke and Suetonius.

Aquila and Prisca, then, were Jews exiled from Rome. When Paul met them at Corinth, were they also Christians? Perhaps. In either case, however, they had certainly heard of Christ, because there had been Roman Jewish Christians right from Pentecost (Acts 2:10). Indeed, the expression used by Suetonius in connection with the disturbances at Rome—"instigated by Chrestus (*impulsore Chresto*)"—seems to be a reference to Jesus the Christ, about whom the Jews at Rome

were raising such a row.

If Aquila and Prisca were not already Christians when Paul first met them at Corinth, they became Christians very soon, joining him in the local ministry and tent-making business in that city for the next eighteen months (Acts 18:11). Then, in the summer of 51, they journeyed with Paul to Ephesus (18:18-19), where they remained even after Paul left that city for a while. It was at Ephesus that they instructed the fervent convert Apollos (18:24-26). Paul came back to the city in 52, after Apollos had gone over to Corinth (Acts 18:27-19:1).

In the story of the instruction that Aquila and Prisca gave to Apollos, it is most noticeable that the lady is named before her husband, a fact which may suggest that she was a more prominent and memorable person than he (18:18,26). This usage is not peculiar to Luke. Paul, too, when he refers to this couple, twice (of three times) names Prisca before her husband (Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19).

Aquila and Prisca were still with Paul in Ephesus in the spring of 55; indeed, one of the local parishes met in their home (1 Corinthians 16:19). Claudius having died in 54 (Dio Cassius, History 61.35), we find Aquila and Prisca back at Rome by the winter of 57/58; they also hosted one of the parish churches in that city (Romans 16:3-5). By the early 60s the couple once again moved to Ephesus, which is the last place we hear of them in Holy Scripture (2 Timothy 4:19).

Up to this point in their lives, it would seem, Aquila and Prisca had not yet met Luke, who later wrote about them. Luke, having remained at Philippi during the years 49 to 58 (Acts 16:16-17,40; 17:1; 20:6, closely compared), was not with Paul during those first trips to Corinth and Ephesus, when he was with Aquila and Prisca. Later, when Luke himself was with Paul, the other two were not. As the Third Missionary Journey drew to a close, Luke was at Paul's side continually, from the time he left Macedonia in the spring of 58 (Acts 20:6), during the two years of Caesarean imprisonment (Acts 24:27; Colossians 4:14; Philemon 24), throughout the subsequent voyage to Rome (Acts 27:1; 28:14), and, it would seem, during Paul's two years of house arrest there (Acts 28:30; 2 Timothy 4:11). By the time that Luke and Paul reached Rome, Aquila and Prisca were already back at Ephesus (4:19). During that prolonged period, then, Aquila and Prisca were always someplace else. However, when Luke finally did meet Prisca and her husband, sometime after Paul had been martyred, the couple became his source for much of the nearly five years of

apostolic history covered in Acts 18-19.

Indeed, we suspect that Luke may have come to know them even better than did Paul. This suspicion would explain, at least, why the Acts of the Apostles habitually calls Prisca by the affectionate diminutive "Priscilla," or "little Prisca," a liberty that Paul never took when referring to the lady (though some later copyists of the Pauline manuscripts did). Along with the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Martha and Mary of Bethany, Joanna, Salome, and others, Aquila's wife became one of the women that Luke interviewed in preparing to write his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

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