

"PAUL THE ROMAN CITIZEN"
(Acts 16:1-40 and Acts 25:1-12)
(Adapted from Ben Witherington III
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Acts 16:1-40

There is clear evidence from before the middle of the first century A.D. that Jews could indeed be Roman citizens (see NewDocs 4:111). Yet in the year A.D. 49, Jews definitely were out of favor with the imperium, and the slave owners had accused Paul and Silas of being Jews (Acts 16:20-21), something they could not deny. Under the circumstances, perhaps there was not time to make a proper presentation of citizenship claims, which likely would have involved producing the *testatio*, a certified private copy of evidence of a person's birth and citizenship inscribed in wax on a wooden diptych¹. We may be sure that a proper presentation would have been important since it was a rarity for Jews to be Roman citizens.

Paul does not use his citizenship to escape punishment [in Philippi], but rather, to force a restoration of his honor and good name. This was important since Paul no doubt wanted to return to the city and revisit his converts there. Also, Paul did not want the reception of the gospel to stand or fall on the basis of his high status as a Roman citizen, which explains why he did not mention it prior to the event jeopardizing the future gospel work in Philippi. In other words, Paul used his Roman citizenship, just as he did his Jewish pedigree, in a prudential manner when it could help advance the gospel or forestall its hindering. Paul really believed in an eternal commonwealth of which Christians were already citizens (Phil. 3:20), and that the form of this world and its institutions were passing away (1 Cor. 7:29-31). Thus, he was perfectly prepared to sit lightly with the status markers of this world, using them only when necessary to advance the gospel, not merely when it was personally advantageous.

Acts 25:1-12

In only two places does Paul's Roman citizenship become a significant issue: Acts 16 and Acts 22-25. In both cases Paul mentions this only to Roman officials, and in both cases he does so to influence the conduct of fellow Roman citizens, to dissuade them from treating him improperly. When Paul in Acts is speaking to Jews, or Gentile pagans, or a Christian audience in a nonlegal setting, he never mentions the matter.

For obvious reasons, Paul does not mention his Roman citizenship within earshot of a volatile Jewish crowd. This would just be adding fuel to an already fast-burning fire. We also must remember that for Paul, his Roman citizenship was at least third in the list of important identity markers, if not lower down the list. He had no need to mention it in his letters, since, apparently, his converts never challenged him about the matter, nor does he speak to Roman charges against him directly in the letters. But Paul's present situation demanded that he mention his Roman citizenship.



¹ A diptych is something like an ancient wallet. It is made with two flat plates, sometimes made of leather, which form a pair. These are often attached with a hinge. Some were very simple and others much more elaborate.

The major benefits of Roman law went to those with the most honor from a Roman point of view, and this meant Roman citizens, especially the patricians among them.

Thus, the tribune Lysias had to ask a few questions before he proceeded to torture Paul to get the truth out of him. Lysias does not want to take any action that he later will regret, which would happen if it turned out that he was torturing not merely a Roman citizen, but his social superior. Since Paul was a citizen from birth, he had a higher status than Lysias, who had purchased Roman citizenship (Acts 22:28). Augustus had decreed that Roman citizens were exempt from torture as a means of judicial disclosure.

Paul, an inveterate traveler, quite possibly carried with him a certificate of citizenship, or at least a *libellus*², which vouched for citizenship and stated that the original was on file in a municipal register in one's hometown. The penalties for falsely claiming citizenship were so severe that Lysias could not afford to ignore such a claim. Paul's claim of Roman citizenship in a sense dictates how the rest of his story will play out in Acts, including whether he would be turned over to the Jews or would go on to Rome.

A few telltale signs from Paul's letters do reflect that he was a Roman citizen. First, he has a Roman name. The name *Paulus* is rare in the east, and may suggest high birth. Also, Paul's strategy of evangelizing Roman colony cities is best explained by some kind of natural connection he has with such cities. This may also explain Paul's desire to go to Spain, which was a major center of Romanization. Furthermore, Paul claims to be a Gentile to the Gentiles, but what would be his natural connection with them if he was not a Roman citizen? Finally, Paul's letters are peppered with Roman names. All other things being equal, this favors the case for his Roman citizenship, for it suggests that he related well to such people.

When Augustus had set up the empire, he actually encouraged the appeal of cases from the provinces to Caesar, if they touched on the *dignitas* as of the emperor. This was a way of centralizing power even further. The *Lex Julia* was clear that if a provincial procurator interfered with this process undertaken by a Roman citizen, the penalty was death (Ulpian, *Digest* 48:6-7). This right of appeal protected the citizens from coercion by the procurator. Of course, for Paul, there was another upside to the appeal: it gave him an occasion to testify for his faith before the emperor. Also, in A.D.59, after five years of reasonably good rule by Nero³, Paul had no reason to fear him more than Festus, or to doubt that he had a better chance at justice in Rome than in the volatile province of Judea.

Festus, however, was now in an awkward spot. If the charges against Paul were frivolous or untrue, how could he explain to Nero why he had taken up his time and the empire's money by sending Paul to Rome? If a Roman citizen had appealed to the emperor, what had been so grave about the situation that he felt compelled to do so? How would Festus explain this without looking incompetent or not in control of the Judean in the situation?

² The Latin word *libellus* simply means "little book" and is associated with the word *library*. It would have been a parchment document that contained important information.

³ Nero's reign would later deteriorate into a reign of terror causing many Christians to think of him as the Anti-Christ. The major change in Nero would take place about three years after Paul made his appeal to Caesar in A.D. 59.