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Cornelius (Centurion)

According to the book of Acts, Cornelius (Κορνήλιος) was the first Gentile convert of the early Christian movement, converted and baptized by the apostle Peter (Peter [Apostle]) after the two had come to meet by divine intervention through complementary visions (Acts 10:1–11:18; 15:6–11; Hengel & Schwemer, 2019). Cornelius was a Roman centurion (ἑκατοντάρχης, a military leader over a division of 100 soldiers), in the early 40s CE stationed in Caesarea Maritima, a coastal city in which there were regular tensions and disturbances between the predominantly non-Jewish population and the Jewish inhabitants. Flavius Josephus reports that at the outbreak of the Jewish war in 66 CE the pagan (Pagan/Paganism) people saw an opportunity to avenge themselves on the Jews and murdered more than 20,000 Jewish inhabitants of Caesarea “within one hour” and conducted the others to the dockyards (Jos. Bell. 2.18.1.§457; LCL 203.500–501). In remarkable contrast, Luke portrays Cornelius as a Gentile of special piety and loved by the Jews. He is presented as a God-fearer, someone who sympathized strongly with the Jewish faith without having entered Judaism by way of circumcision (Acts 10:3). The name Cornelius was a popular one, so widespread that no firm conclusions can be drawn vis-à-vis the Cornelius of Acts. In comparison with other named Roman officials mentioned in Acts (e.g. Sergius Paulus, ἀνθύπατος, “proconsul,” Acts 13:6–12; Gallio, ἀνθύπατος, “proconsul,” Acts 18:12–17; Felix, ἱγεμόν, "procurator" (Acts 23:24; also Porcius Festus, 24:27), Claudius Lysias, χιλιάρχος, “military tribune,” Acts 24:22), Cornelius belonged to the relatively lower ranks of hierarchy (see Kennedy, 1992, 799).

The Italian Cohort

Whereas the presence of the Italian Cohort in Caesarea has been confirmed for the period 69–157 CE (e.g. Jos. Bell. 3.4.2.§64–67; LCL 203.594–597), the Romans had no legionary troops in Judea in the years 6–66 CE. Instead, in the 40s CE, the Roman governors had auxiliary cohorts (auxilia) under their command, for example, in Caesarea and Sebaste (see Jos. Ant. 19.356–366; LCL 433.384–389; Jos. Bell. 2.15.3.§318; LCL 203.444–447), and Cornelius must have been in
command of such an auxiliary cohort. The exact identification of the “Italian Cohort” (Acts 10:1), though, is still a matter of dispute. A cohort was a military unit of approximately 600 men (mostly infantry), one-tenth of a legion (5,000–6,000 men); cohorts were normally divided into six centuries of 80 men each (“not the implied 100 in the name”; Kennedy, 1992, 799). From Greek and Roman sources, at least two “Italian cohorts” are known (Levinskaya, 2004). Originally, the Italian Cohort, which in Roman history is known as the Cohors Italica civium Romanorum, probably was a unit of soldiers recruited among freed slaves in Italy. The soldiers who served in it had or received Roman citizenship at their enlistment. Later, the Italian cohorts also consisted of Syrians, volunteers (both freeborn citizens and freedmen) in all likelihood (Levinskaya, 2004).

Theology

In Christian theology, the story of Cornelius plays a role in debates about infant baptism, sparked by the remark that Cornelius “with all his household” were God-fearers (Acts 10:2) and, in the end, were all baptized (Acts 10:48; Avemarie, 2002), and in debates about the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion, the outpouring of the Spirit portrayed here as an event preceding and separate from water baptism: Acts 10:44–48; Dunn, 1970).

Reception History

According to the Pseudo-Clementines (Clementine Literature, Pseudo-), Cornelius as an emissary of Caesar was instrumental in removing Simon Magus from Antioch (Ps.-Clem. H 20.13; ANF 8.343; Ps.-Clem. R 10.54–55; ANF 8.206). According to Apos. Con. 7.46.3 (PG 1.1049; ANF 7.478), Cornelius was the second bishop of Caesarea, after Zacchaeus. In liturgy, in the Martyriologium Romanum his feast day is Oct 20 (in the Orthodox tradition Sep 13). Of special interest is an apocryphal text recently translated for the first time in English, the so-called The Acts of Cornelius the Centurion (PG 114.1293–1312; trans. Burke & Witakowski, 2016). In the work (given in two versions and dating after the 4th cent. CE), Cornelius has become a successful missionary (Mission) in Skepsis (Asia Minor), where he converts Demetrius, the local ruler, a worshiper of Apollo and Zeus and persecutor of Christians (Persecution of Christians), and his wife Evanthia and their son, after his wife and son had been trapped in the collapsed shrine of Zeus (where Cornelius had refused to sacrifice to the idols) and had been miraculously saved by Cornelius. It also contains a legend about Cornelius’ travelling coffin (longer text 5.9–11; shorter text 5.3–5; Burke & Witakowski, 2016, 359–360) and one about the right hand of Cornelius as a relic (Burke & Witakowski, 2016, 360–361).

Historiography

An overview of the interpretation of the Cornelius episode in the first six centuries CE has been provided by F. Bovon (1967). From the end of the 19th century, critical research has focused on the identification of the Italian Cohort (Ramsay, 1896; Speidel, 1982–1983; Levinskaya, 2004), and on the question of the sources of the Cornelius episode (Dibelius, 1961; Löning, 1974; Haacker, 1980; Bovon. 1970). In more recent studies, the reception of Cornelius in
early Christian sources (Burke & Witakowski, 2016) and more literary approaches (Witherup, 1993; Gaventa, 1992; Green, 1997; Brink, 2014) come to the fore. Especially the parallels with the centurion in Luke 7:1–10, also favored by the Jewish people and builder of the synagogue in Capernaum, and the characters in Luke 1–2 (Zechariah and Elisabeth, Simeon, Anna) are noteworthy (Pervo, 2009, 267–268).

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Bibliography


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