

## Lesson 8

# The Roman Empire

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## THE CAESARS OF ROME

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"CAESAR" is the name of the branch of the aristocratic family of Julius Caesar which established an ascendancy over the Roman Republic in the triumph of Augustus (31 B.C.) and kept it until Nero's death in A.D. 68. All rulers of the Roman Empire at this time had Caesar prefixed to their name. The name of Caesar became so identified with the emperor that the idea of Caesar became synonymous with the emperor. Even after the Roman era in the Byzantine Empire, anyone chosen as ruler was called Caesar. Eventually the name Caesar became Czar for the Russians, and Kaiser for the Germans.

### **JULIUS CAESAR: (49 B.C. - 44 B.C.)**

Following a century of revolution Pompey and Julius Caesar emerged as the dominant political and military forces of the Republic. Pompey surrendered his military conquests to the Senate while Julius, being more astute, continued his pursuit of power which led to a civil war between Pompey and Julius Caesar. Caesar won that conflict and established himself as sole dictator for the next five years.

Julius Caesar ruled Rome as a Republic, before it became an Empire, in 49-44 B.C. He did much that infuriated the Roman Senate by assuming dictatorial powers and was killed by a group of jealous republicans (led by Brutus and Cassius) as he walked into the Senate on the Ides of March, 44 B.C.

### **AUGUSTUS CAESAR: (44 B.C. - A.D. 14 )**

Julius had no natural successor and the Senate had failed to foresee the need for one. Julius Caesar had adopted his nephew who at the time of his death was studying in Greece. In the political confusion the brash 19 year old Octavian rushed to Rome and took his uncle's title and name. Civil War ensued, until in 31 B.C., Octavian defeated his enemies Anthony and Cleopatra. He was crowned, declared deity, and his coinage was minted on the occasion declaring him Augustus Caesar.

Augustus' reign as emperor of the Roman Empire began what is known as the PAX ROMANA, or Roman Peace, which lasted 200 years. He had a sense of mission in uniting the Empire while uniting the political opponents within the Senate. Augustus introduced many much needed reforms resulting in peace and prosperity, and therefore the admiration of the people. He was responsible for transforming the city of brick into a city of marble. Under his watchful eye art and literature reached its pinnacle. Rome reached its peak of splendor under Augustus Caesar.

Augustus died in A.D. 14. He had no natural offspring and was forced to choose a successor from his relatives. He chose TIBERIAS, his stepson, who reigned from A.D. 23 to 27.

**TIBERIAS CAESAR ( A.D. 14-37)**

was a paranoid emperor. (And who wouldn't be with the Roman political intrigues!) He was suspicious of everyone which led to his long stream of "treason trials". He was as unpopular as Augustus was popular. It was during Tiberias Caesar's reign that Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea and Jesus Christ was crucified.

**CALIGULA (Gaius) (37-41)**

was next on the throne. He was a madman and the world was mercifully spared his maniacal ways when he was murdered by his own Praetorian Guard (body guards).

**CLAUDIUS CAESAR (A.D. 41-54)**

was Caligula's uncle and began his rule at the ripe old age of 50. He was a repulsive man with cerebral palsy. Despite his handicap he was an able ruler and added to the Roman Empire Mauretania, Britain, Lycia, and Thrace. He was poisoned by his evil wife, Agrippina, who wanted to assure that her son by another marriage became the successor. Her 17 year old son was Nero.

**NERO (A.D. 54-68)**

was a hedonist playboy and fancied himself an artist. Insanity, paranoia, and jealousy must have run in the Caesar blood for he murdered his own mother. In A.D. 64 fire broke out in the slum area near the Capena Gate and destroyed half of Rome. Rumor accused the emperor himself of starting the fire to clear the area for his grandiose building plans. ("Nero fiddled while Rome burned") To distract attention from himself he blamed the Christians and began the most horrible persecution up to that time. He probably gave the order to chop off the head of the Apostle Paul. Eventually his subjects revolted and in A.D. 68 he committed suicide. His dying words were: "Qaulis artifex pereo" (What an artist dies with me?)

## THE CAESARS' TIMELINE

*Biblical Caesars were Augustus, Luke 2:1, Tiberius, Acts 11:28, 17:7, 18:2, Claudius, and Nero is implied.*

27 BC - AD 14	Augustus Caesar	
AD 14-37	Tiberius Caesar	
AD 37-41	Caligula	--- Roman Emperors during N.T. times
AD 41-54	Claudius	
AD 54-68	Nero	
AD 68-69	Galba, Otho, Vitellius	
AD 69-79	Vespasian	
AD 79-81	Titus	
AD 81-96	Domitian	

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## POLITICS OF ROME

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### GOVERNMENT BY PROXY

The Roman Empire was a chain of conquered kingdoms that stretched from the Euphrates to Spain, and from Africa to Europe. Rome would conquer a people and leave a puppet ruler in place. Sometimes that ruler was the normal monarch, other times not. The general principle was to establish a chain of command loyal to Caesar.

### GOVERNOR

Known as proconsul (deputy) administered by the Senate but chosen by Caesar. Governors are frequently mentioned in New Testament Scriptures. There were three main responsibilities of governors 1) military security and public order, 2) taxation and revenues, and 3) jurisdiction of the court system.

### PROCURATOR

A procurator was a Roman imperial administrator who served as financial officer for a province. In third class provinces procurators also served as governor. Three in Scripture are Pontus Pilate, Felix and Festus. They generally had troops at their disposal and were responsible for the military and for the financial administration of the province.

### KING

Such as Herod the Great, King of the Jews, was also procurator of Judea appointed by Julius Caesar 47 B.C. Later after much struggle and infighting, he was again conferred

the title by Augustus (Octavian). He appointed his son Herod to be military prefect of Galilee.

### **TETRARCH**

A Tetrarch was any ruler of a fourth part of a nation. Romans gave this Greek title to any ruler of part of an Oriental province. Thus Herod the Great's (died 4 B.C.) sons disputed their father's will and were given parts of the realm.

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## **ROMAN CULTURE**

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Rome was a massive city of over a million people at the time of Christ. It was the largest and most magnificent city of its day. It was called "Urbs Septicollis", (City of the Seven Hills) because of the seven hills upon which it was built.

The city featured more than 400 temples dedicated to the worship of pagan gods. It was noted for its political FORUM, the Coliseum where Olympic games were played, its public baths, buildings, aqueducts, arches, and roads. In one generation the city of brick became a marble garden. Half of the population were slaves, the rest were either freedmen or foreigners.

### **FREEDMEN**

Freedmen often purchased their liberty by disreputable means. Once only those born in Rome were Roman citizens, but in time anyone born in a Roman Province was a citizen. Hence the Apostle Paul claimed his Roman citizenship and rights for he was born in Tarsus.

Many free citizens were supported almost entirely by the State (some 200,000 of them!) and had nothing on their hands but time and lust to burn. They were idle and sunken in dissipation. Their thoughts were chiefly of their own pleasures and how to gratify their carnal desires. They lived for the Theater and the Arena.

### **PUBLIC AMUSEMENTS**

The Coliseum where Olympic games were played, public baths, theaters, and the Arena for entertainment of the masses were but a few of the worldly enticements of the city of Rome. Romans observed more than 100 holidays a year many of which featured public entertainment paid for by the government. Even the poorer classes enjoyed the free entertainment of Rome. One of their poets described the poor as having only two needs, bread and circuses.

Chariot races were a favorite entertainment as people bet on their charioteers. The races were held in huge oblong areas called a "circus." The Roman Circus Maximus seated more than 300,000 people!

At the Coliseum gladiators fought each other, or wild beasts in a huge amphitheater for the delight of the blood thirsty Romans. Condemned prisoners and often Christians were thrown to the wild animals. The floor of the amphitheater was wooden under which slaves worked machines that raised and lowered animals into the arena.

The theater was a popular entertainment of the masses where they enjoyed Greek and Roman plays and pantomimes. Much of the people spent a good deal of time at the public baths. These were huge public malls housing pools, hot and cold baths, gymnasiums, art galleries and libraries.

### **POOR**

The poor and destitute crowded the city of Rome. There were no provisions for the poor. They were, for the most part, as miserable as slaves. There were no hospitals. Brotherly love and charity to the less fortunate were unknown virtues in Roman society. Charity was disdained as a questionable act of kindness which simply prolonged their useless existence. Any manual labor, except for farming, was abhorrent to the Roman citizen.

### **SLAVES**

The slave was the backbone of Roman society. The slave was any non-citizen who had been captured in war or enslaved for any number of other transgressions. The slave was unprotected. Males and females were exposed to horrible cruelties. At best they were used as disposable entertainment in the arenas either being thrown to wild beasts or fighting as gladiators. At worst they were confined to the hold of a ship chained for life to an oar until strength or hope was gone.

Roman slaves included prisoners of war, people who had been captured by pirates at sea and sold as slaves, children that were sold by their parents, and condemned criminals. Slaves came from all levels of society from educated Greek teachers to farmers and miners. Slaves were often used to work the mines, where they were confined in subterranean prisons until they died.

### **LANGUAGE**

The language of Rome was officially Latin, while Greek was still the lingua franca, or the trade language known by most in order to conduct trade or to travel. In Palestine the common language was Aramaic, though Greek was the language spoken as the common denominator between cultures. Hebrew continued to be used among the more religious and noble classes in Palestine. Thus, when Jesus was crucified by Roman soldiers, Luke and John recorded that a title was placed on the cross written in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, "THIS IS THE KING OF THE JEWS." (Luke 23:38, John 19:19)

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## OCCUPATION OF PALESTINE

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It is into this cesspool of debase characters, devoid even of the basic knowledge of the ten commandments that we find the land of Palestine plunged. Is it any wonder that the Jews hated Romans. Not only were they the foreign conquerors, but they were pagan idolaters without morality as well.

Roman soldiers patrolled the streets of every nation including Palestine. Roman flags could be seen over all their barracks and often the Roman emblem, the eagle, would be prominently placed in the city to show who was in charge. The Roman Governor and his emissaries made it eminently clear who was the conqueror, and who were the conquered.

They were the invading army, a foreign military power occupying the proud land of Palestine. It is not surprising that the Jews hated having to put up with these Roman soldiers in their country. Is it any wonder their hopes of a Messiah, promised in the Old Testament, were at a fevered pitch?

### THE DENARII

The Jews' unhappiness was even greater because they also had to pay taxes to their Roman conquerors. These taxes were paid with foreign currency in the form of Roman coins, called DENARIUS, which carried the imprint of the image of Caesar Augustus on it. (Matthew 22:20-21) (This was idolatry!) You can imagine your own feelings of hatred toward invading armies to which you had to pay tribute.



The denarii (denarius, singular) was the Roman coin on which Augustus Caesar's image was minted. It is not remarkable then that this proud deified emperor should mandate that all the world should be taxed. After all it was his denarii.

Matthew 22:20, Mark 12:16, Luke 20:24 all tell of that coin and its all important superscription. "Whose image and inscription is on the coin? They said to Him, 'Caesar!' Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."

It is interesting that it was because of Roman taxes (the denarii) that the baby Jesus' mother is forced to return to Bethlehem, the city of David, where the King was to be born. And it was because of Roman soldiers, and a cruel betrayal of thirty pieces of silver (possibly denarii as well) that Jesus was forcibly nailed to the cross. Truly God had His hand on the events surrounding the birth of our Savior.

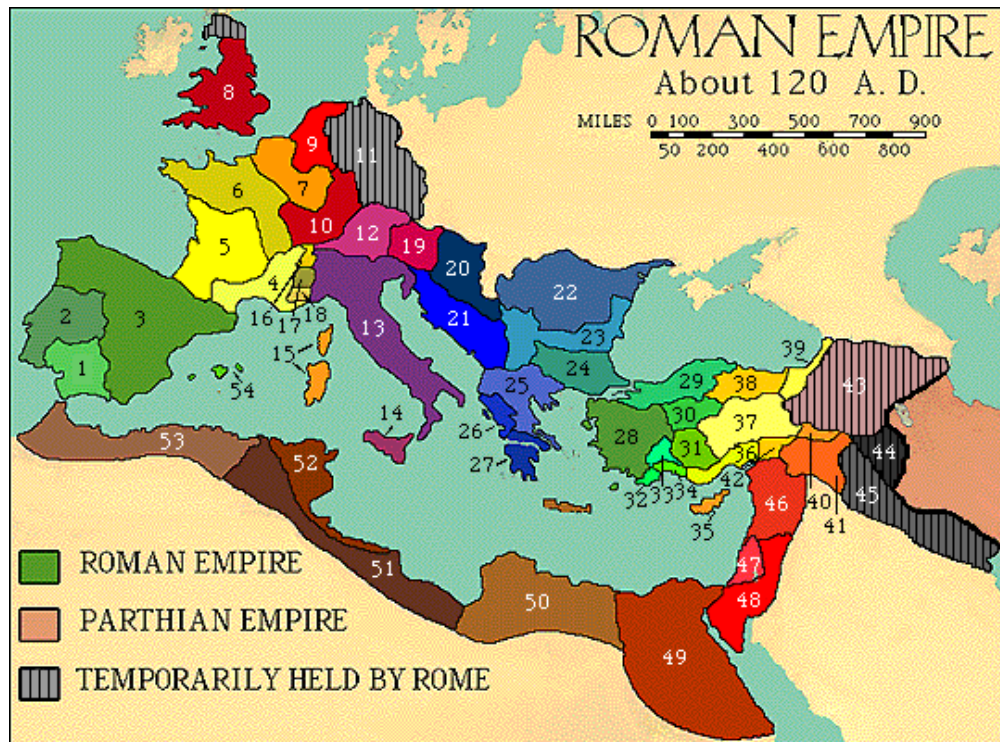
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## THE ROMAN EMPIRE

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The Jews had been conquered by the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire kept a strong military force in every country it occupied. Although there were many Roman soldiers in Palestine, they were only stationed there; they were not permanent residents.

To gain a better knowledge of the geography of the region of Palestine and the Roman Empire we must turn to the use of a map of the world of Jesus' day.



Observe that the Roman Empire ruled over three continents; Europe, Africa, and Asia. Occupying the center of these three continents was the large body of water known as the Mediterranean Sea. The name "Mediterranean" came from the Romans. The word "Medi" means "middle," and the word for land or terrain is "Terra." Obviously they gave it that name because it occupied the center of the three continents.

The Roman Empire covered a vast area of the then-known world. In order for us to get a good feel for the size of area that we are discussing we must compare it to things that are more familiar to us. Using the US map there are three cities we can measure between. They are Los Angeles, Denver, and Washington D.C. The distance between Los Angeles and Denver is about the same as between Spain and the city of Rome, which is about a 1000 miles. The distance from Denver to Washington D.C. is about 1500 and is comparable to the distance between Rome and Palestine.

Tremendous distances separated the outer edges of the Roman Empire. The Roman soldiers had to travel long distances to reach and defend the countries they had conquered. In order to assist in the travel over such distances the Romans built a system of highways throughout the Empire.

The Romans built roads and so connected the world and enabled armies to quickly traverse vast areas to quiet military disturbances. The Roman army built some 50,000 miles of roads in the area of Syria/Palestine. The Jews were well aware of the Roman roads and how they banished the robbers who for millennia had troubled travel through their countryside. One of their writers wrote: "The Romans have given us world peace, and we travel without fear along the roads and cross the seas wherever we wish." These highways were known as "vias."

They built them to last placing layer upon layer of clay and other materials (chalk and gravel) so that the roads would hold up for hundreds (even thousands) of years. On top of the layers they carefully laid stone slabs, with ditches on either side of the highway.

Roman armies built thousands of miles of vias throughout the Roman world. They built roads in straight lines, even cutting tunnels through mountains. Stone mile markers were placed along the routes to help travelers keep track of distances.

One of the most famous roads is the Appian Way, named for the Roman ruler Appius Claudius, who began its construction in 312 B.C. It runs south of Rome along the coast of western Italy to its southernmost tip. The road was used by the Apostle Paul and continues to be used today! All roads led to Rome.

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## **THE ROMAN ARMY**

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Augustus was commander-in-chief of a standing army of 340,000. He was head of the Senate and high-priest of a religion of the State, which was emperor worship. He reigned with absolute power.

The Roman army was responsible for maintaining world peace. Roman legions provided the military power of the empire. A legion was composed of 6,000 men and 120 cavalry. Legionnaires were Roman citizens who enlisted for 20 years. Of equal size was the non-volunteer, non-citizen army of men drafted for a 25 year term.

Most important to the Caesar was his Praetorian (Imperial) Guard (numbering 10,000!) of hand-picked soldiers to guard and serve Caesar. All Roman soldiers were very disciplined. Severe rules and equal punishment ensued for any infraction of Roman military law. Sleeping while on duty, for instance, was punishable by death.

There was a military presence in each of the provinces of the Roman Empire from Britain to Syria. When the soldiers were not fighting, the army built roads, bridges, and walls to



expand their control over the Empire. During war the army built ingenious pontoon bridges to cross rivers and isthmuses using boats lined up side by side with a bridge being built right over them.

To travel by sea the Romans built ships powered by sails and oars. Slaves, or captured peoples, were used to man the oars for years at a time, while chained in the lower decks.

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## **ROMAN RELIGIONS**

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All religions were considered alike, none to be taken too seriously. It was said that "All roads lead to Rome," but all religions led to nowhere. All real belief in life after death had long since departed with the ideas of their favorite philosophers replacing it.

The proliferation of gods, oracles, divination, dreams, astrology, magic, necromancy, and emperor worship all contributed to the moral and spiritual decay of the Roman Empire. The only religion that Rome insisted on was the deification and worship of the emperor. Mingled with this godless society were superstitions and witchcraft which reached their lowest ebb. It was in this vacuum that Judaism found a home. It offered hope for the hopeless, life beyond the grave, and a reason for morality and living.

The common people worshipped a plethora of gods bordering on animism, or the worship and veneration of gods in all nature. There were 12 major deities, many adopted from Greek mythology. There were literally thousands of lesser gods, including such as Vesta, the goddess of the home, Janus, the god of the door, the god of coins, the god of the storehouse, the table, etc. At every meal they would offer part of the food to these family gods. When Paul observed that Athens was totally given over to idolatry he was not exercising hyperbole. It was true! Such was the case in Rome as well.

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## **EMPEROR WORSHIP**

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The cult of emperor worship began innocently with the honoring of dead Julius Caesar. The origin of emperor worship came primarily from the Egyptians who deified their Pharaohs. The Ptolemies were considered successors of the Pharaohs, the Caesars were successors to the Ptolemies. These heroes appeared to the common man to be godlike in power and authority. In Rome itself the myth of a deified ruler evolved around 4 B.C. under Greek influence and thought. Augustus encouraged the idea of altars being set up in his honor, although he came short of allowing temples in his name. Each succeeding Caesar seemed to more firmly adopt the idea to cement fear and favor with the common people. The Greeks had no qualms about hero worship and spread the cult far and wide throughout the Mediterranean world.

The biblical mention of Pergamos in the book of Revelation refers to emperor worship as the place "where Satan's seat is..." "...These things says he who has the sharp sword with two edges. I know your works, and where you dwell, even where Satan's seat is; and you hold fast my name, and have not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwells." (Rev. 2:13)

Satan's seat was in reference to emperor worship in the city of Pergamos, which had built no less than three different temples to the Caesars, and where sacrifices were offered to them. Only the first temple had been built at the time of the apostle John's Revelation, but Caesar worship was sufficiently oppressing to Christians as to provoke martyrdom of faithful Christians who refused to confess the ritual litany, "Caesar is lord."

Early in the second century Pliny writes concerning the effect that Christianity was having on the temples, cult shrines, and butchers guild which was finding its commerce affected by the Jesus way.

Pliny writes to Caesar, "Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ -- none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing -- these I thought it proper to discharge. Others who were named by that informer at first confessed themselves Christians, and then denied it; true, they had been of that persuasion but they had quitted it, some three years, others many years, and a few as much as twenty-five years ago. They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ." (Pliny, Letters, 10.96,97)

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## **ROMAN PHILOSOPHY**

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It is proved true under Roman rule that where there is no God there is no need for morality either. If there is no life after death, no hereafter, no judgment to come, no god who tries men in the balance, then there is no ethic or morality. Therefore, "Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." Remove God from His throne and his rightful place in society and all society goes to Hell. The degeneration of Roman morality could clearly be traced along the lines of its philosophers.

Without question the philosophers contributed to the moral decay of Roman society. There were two opposing philosophical positions in Rome, the Stoics and Epicureans. "One flattered pride the other gratified its sensuality; the one was in accordance with the original national character, the other with its own decay and corruption...One turned selfward, the other fleshward; the one to self-deification, the other to indulgence of every passion and worship of matter... Both ultimately led to atheism and despair." (Edersheim, Chapter 11, p 178)

The Stoics believed that the human spirit was the greatest good, and happiness was to be found in pursuing reason, and freeing themselves from passions, concentrating on controlling the world around them.

The Epicureans believed that death should not be feared since it simply ends all sensations, and that deities did not concern themselves with mankind, therefore should not be feared. Hence their lifestyles were exemplified by the gratification of man's baser appetites and passions.

Both philosophies led to atheism and despair. Thus Roman society was forced into a godless despair of life. For what then did they live? Suicide was considered an alternative, as was abortion and even euthanasia. Life became cheap and the meaning of life even cheaper. Despair reigned in the ranks of the wealthy.

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## **ROMAN IMMORALITY**

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"It has been rightly said, that the idea of conscience, as we understand it, was unknown to heathenism. Absolute right did not exist. Might was right. The social relations exhibited, if possible, even deeper corruption. The sanctity of marriage had ceased. Female dissipation and the general dissoluteness led at last to an almost entire cessation of marriage. Abortion, and the exposure and murder of newly-born children, were common and tolerated; unnatural vices, which even the greatest philosophers practiced, if not advocated, attained proportions which defy description..."

"It would be unsavory to describe how far the worship of indecency was carried; how public morals were corrupted by the mimic representations of everything that was vile, and even by the pandering of a corrupt art."  
(from Edersheim's Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Chapter 11, p179)

We understand now that the description of a debase society described by Paul in the first chapter in his letter to the Romans was not a make believe literary scenario, nor a straw man, but a vivid chronicle of Roman society. (Read Romans 1:19-32)

End of Lesson