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"THE ROMAN INFLUENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT"

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THE New Testament throbs with the life blood of the Roman Empire of the first century, for it was within Rome's geographic borders and under her political administration, and in the atmosphere of her economic and religious life that the New Testament had its setting.

In the days of Jesus Christ, Palestine was not an independent Jewish kingdom, but an integral part of the Roman Empire. Herod the Great was simply a petty king to whom Rome had entrusted the administration of the country; the census mentioned in Luke 2:1 shows that Rome was the real power in the land and that her governor in Syria had general oversight of Palestine. When Herod died, his sons hastened to Rome to secure the favor of the emperor; Archelaus was especially anxious to have his father's power and was willing to undergo any humiliation from the emperor, if he might be granted this favor. He was successful in his plea and won the lion's share of power in Palestine; his brothers, Antipas and Philip, receiving only the smaller and less lucrative portions of the land as their spheres of government.

The Jewish people were bitterly opposed to the rule of Archelaus and finally the emperor investigated their charges and then at once removed Archelaus and in his place sent out a Roman procurator to govern the land. Antipas and Philip still retained their old positions, but the new procurator had general oversight of their work.

Now this Roman influence in Palestine is of high importance in the study of Jesus the Christ; indeed, it is intimately connected with his birth, his life and his death.

The home of Mary was in Nazareth, and in the ordinary course of events Christ would have been born there. But "in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled. . . .

And all went to enroll themselves, every one to his own city. And Joseph also went from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David; to enroll himself with Mary, who was betrothed to him, being great with child. And it came to pass, while they were there, the days were fulfilled that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first born son." Thus it was by the providential issuing of a Roman decree that the Old Testament prophecy of the birthplace of the Messiah was fulfilled, and Jesus was born in Bethlehem instead of Nazareth.

In the days of Christ's ministry, when the Jewish leaders began to be embittered against him, they watched keenly to see what would be his attitude toward the Roman government. Here they believed that they could trap him in a dilemma; if they could get him to favor Rome, then the people would no longer look upon him as the Messiah; while, on the other hand, if he in any way spoke ill of the Roman government, they would report him to the procurator for treason.

It was with this idea in view that they so often censured Christ because of his attitude toward the publicans, the men who collected the taxes for the Roman government. But neither by trickery nor slander could they force Christ to take either horn of the dilemma. He told them "that the publicans and harlots go into the kingdom of God before you." When he picked his disciples, he deliberately chose Matthew the publican—whose presence in the apostolic group must have been a continual thorn in the side of the Jewish leaders. His last act before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem was to dine with Zacchaeus, a chief publican. But in all these cases Christ handled the situation so skillfully that he never prejudiced the common people against the Messiahship, nor made any remark detrimental to the Roman government.

Finally these Jewish leaders presented their dilemma to Christ in a way that seemed inescapable. "Is it lawful for us to give tribute unto Caesar or not?" But again Christ escaped them with the answer: "Render unto

Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

Outwitted at every turn, the Jewish leaders at last used treachery to do away with Him. Through the treason of Judas, and the crooked work of the Sanhedrin, Christ was brought before the Roman procurator to be tried on the charge of inciting insurrection against the Roman government; but they could not prove their charge, and Pilate pronounced Christ innocent, "for he perceived that for envy the chief priests had delivered him up." Then Pilate, since the Jews would not listen to a verdict of acquittal, thought of a shrewd scheme, a change of venue. "When he knew that he (Christ) was of Herod's jurisdiction, he sent him unto Herod, who himself also was at Jerusalem." But Herod would have nothing to do with the case; he returned it to the procurator's court—the highest court in the land.

By this time all Jerusalem was interested in the trial. The chief priests and the elders at this point clouded the issue. They aroused the patriotic spirit of the mob by reminding them that at this season one political prisoner might be released; therefore let the mob cry for the release of Barabbas, who at one time had led an insurrection against the Roman government. (Upon his record as a murderer they were silent.)

Pilate fell into the trap. As the crowd yelled for Barabbas he foolishly asked them whether they wished Christ or Barabbas. It was a fatal blunder, but he saw it too late. Of course the crowd wanted Barabbas and they insisted on their wish. A riot was growing; anarchy was ready to break forth. Pilate knew the meaning of Jewish mob spirit; the six-day siege of his palace in Caesarea by Jewish mobs was still fresh in his mind. After all why should he jeopardize the peace of the city and the whole land, simply to see that a Galileean peasant got justice in a Roman court? Pilate had never been a man of character and he was not now. He was willing to sacrifice justice to secure expediency. So he ordered Christ to be crucified. Pilate had also a record of maladministration that would be exceedingly detrimental if the Jews should

ever make accusations against him before the emperor, as they had against Archelaus; and he felt it to be a wise move to grant their request and keep their tongues quiet.

Pilate's sentence was at once carried out; Christ was scourged and then led out to Calvary, where he was crucified by Roman soldiery. As Jesus hung upon the cross, these Roman soldiers parted his garments among them and upon his coat they cast lots.

It is exceedingly interesting to note that in so doing, these Roman soldiers were acting according to law in taking the garments of the victim as their wages for the work of crucifixion; and in casting lots upon the coat (since in dividing such a seamless garment its value would have been destroyed) they were simply living up to the gambling instinct that was so common in the army. But in acting according to Roman law and army custom they were actually fulfilling the Messianic prophecy of Psalm 22:18, which had been uttered at least two hundred and fifty years before the city of Rome was founded.

Paul's life, like Christ's, was also intimately bound up with Roman influences. Indeed in Paul's case it is almost impossible to say whether the Jewish or the Roman influence was the more important. Paul's Roman citizenship was a tremendous asset in his missionary work; it is of such high significance in understanding Paul's work, that a special paper at a later time will be devoted exclusively to this theme. At present let us look simply at the geographic territory in which Paul worked.

Paul was a great traveler, but in all his recorded journeys, from the time he left Tarsus to study under Gamaliel at Jerusalem until he arrived as a prisoner in the city of Rome, he was never off Roman soil except when in Damascus and Arabia, and even then he was just barely over the border. If he had gone on to Spain as he had hoped to do, he still would have been on Roman soil. His great work in Antioch on the Orontes, and in Asia Minor and Greece was done as truly on Roman soil as was the work he did in the city of Rome itself. Indeed, except in a few isolated instances, all of the actual geo-

graphic setting of the New Testament was laid in the Roman Empire.

The exceptional geographic fitness of the Roman Empire as the setting of the early church is too seldom emphasized. Here under one government was half of the known world; here was a land area two-thirds as large as continental United States, lying in practically the same plane of latitude as our nation, and with a population probably as great per square mile as is ours today. Within this Roman Empire the apostle Paul might have traveled under the protection of the Roman government from the southern boundary of Egypt to the northern boundary of Britain or from the northeastern corner of Asia Minor to Morocco.

Here were more than 2,000,000 square miles of land throughout which a Roman citizen like Paul was free to preach Christianity to 85,000,000 souls. Good roads made communication easy in most parts of this territory. A single stable government made travel comparatively safe. And a knowledge of Greek and Latin would enable a missionary to preach to most of the people without the use of an interpreter.

Shortly after the death of Paul came the great Jewish rebellion against Rome, and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Roman army under Titus. One can not grasp the pathos of Christ's prophecy of the destruction of the Holy City unless he reads the story of the siege. As one browses about in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* he occasionally finds sepulchral inscriptions dedicated to some soldier who took part in that war.

But in New Testament days wars were exceptional. In the days when Rome was a republic, the ambition of her people seems to have been world conquest. Her history in those days was a continual round of military conquests. Toward the close of the republic, however, her great armies became entangled in most bitter civil wars with such disastrous results that Rome soon came to her senses and realized the comparative values of peace and war. Indeed, when the civil wars were concluded, and the gates

of the temple of Janus—which had stood open for over two centuries—were closed, the joy of the people knew no bounds. They were at peace! Their happiness can best be illustrated by an inscription from Halicarnassus in Carnia, where they speak of Augustus, the bringer of this peace, as the “savior of humanity, whose providence fulfilled and outdid the prayers of all men.”

Augustus inaugurated a new Roman policy of “consolidation” rather than conquest. His work was to bind all parts of the empire into a single unit rather than to continue foreign conquests; and with only slight exceptions this was the policy of all the emperors of the first century. The few months of civil war that broke out at the death of Nero, the Jewish war, the defeat of Varus in Germany, were perhaps the most important disturbances of the peace during the first century. But as a whole, especially in comparison with former times, the world was at peace.

It is almost impossible to overemphasize the importance of this *Pax Romana*. Without it, missionary work would have been impossible. The New Testament lands were the great battlefields of the preceding centuries, for from the days of Alexander the Great to the times of Augustus, war was the consuming passion in those lands. But when peace had been established in the Roman Empire, it was possible for Peter to preach on the day of Pentecost to “men from every nation under heaven.” Paul’s great missionary labors would have been a physical impossibility if the empire had been in civil war, or if the respective lands he visited had been independent kingdoms. The Roman Empire of the first century was a prerequisite for Paul’s great missionary campaigns.

This *Pax Romana* has still other significance to the New Testament student. The Roman government became so enamored with this idea of peace, that it was sometimes stretched to the extreme of “peace at any price.” This was especially true in the provinces. During the first century the empire was kept in peace by an army of only 300,000. (What a contrast to those same lands today!) Thus the government officials had to act instantly in case of emergency. They could not wait to see what

would develop, for in a short time the situation might get beyond their military power to handle. A Roman governor had to act on hair-trigger principles; and there were inevitable mistakes and abuses of this policy.

An example of the quickness and efficiency with which Roman officials acted is found in Paul's rescue from the temple mob; it was the instant action of Claudius Lysias that saved Paul's life. On the other hand, Pilate's crucifixion of Jesus illustrates how a cowardly official in a critical situation yielded to a mob. Riots were serious matters in those days and the Jews showed their understanding of this fact by attempting time and again through mob action to prejudice the Roman officials against Paul. And at the end, Paul, like Jesus, had to stand trial upon the charge of inciting insurrection against the Roman government; and, in his case also, it was Jews and not Romans who brought the charges.

With the coming of peace to the Roman Empire there came also a great increase in economic life, and this is likewise reflected in the New Testament. If the figure be not pressed too far, one might say that the captain of industry was the successor of the centurion.

One of the finest comprehensive surveys of the commercial life of the early Roman Empire is to be found in Rev. 18:12-13. "Merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet; and all thyine wood, and every vessel of ivory, and every vessel made of precious wood, and of brass, and iron, and marble; and cinnamon, and spice, and incense, and ointment, and frankincense, and wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and cattle, and sheep; and merchandise of horses and chariots and slaves; and souls of men."

An intensive study of specific industries opens up many unexpected points of interest. Fish from the sea of Galilee were delicacies at Rome, and one can not but let his fancy wonder if perhaps some of those from the "miraculous draught" were served at Caesar's table. Lydia was a type of the business woman of that day. She was in some way connected with a manufacturing establish-

ment in Thyatira, probably acting as sales manager for the city of Philippi. Since this city was a Roman colony, it was an ideal market for the sale of purple garments.

Rev. 3:17-18 is very interesting because it is the comment of the risen Christ upon the business men who were members of the church at Laodicea. That city was the center of great banking and financial transactions; it was the manufacturing point which specialized in the making of a certain kind of cheap cloak; and it was also the home of an eye-remedy of wide renown. The business men of the church had time for all these things but they had no time for the King's business.

When Paul sailed for Rome, the first part of the trip was upon a privately owned commercial ship. But at Myra the centurion transferred him to another vessel. This new ship was owned by the Roman government and was one of a great line of ships whereby the imperial city was supplied with grain from Egypt for three months of the year. The captain of this ship was anxious to make Phoenix before the season of navigation closed, for then he would have a good harbor to winter in. But a great storm overtook his ship and after two weeks' buffeting it was wrecked on Melita. Paul was forced to remain on this island until the opening of navigation in the spring, when he was taken on toward Rome by another of the Alexandrian grain ships. This ship unloaded its wheat at Ostia at the mouth of the Tiber, but passengers were disembarked before that point. They left the ship usually at Puteoli, as Paul did, and then went over the Appian way into Rome.

Much of the business of the empire was carried on by stewards, or even slaves. These stewards are very familiar figures in Christ's parables. The episode of the riot at Ephesus shows that even in New Testament days organized labor was at work. The narrative reads like the newspaper reports of modern strikes. The parable of the vineyard laborers shows also that many laborers were discontent with their hire.

The early church at Jerusalem had many poor, who like the modern Armenians, were absolutely dependent upon

help from churches in other lands. The slave is a very familiar figure in the Roman Empire and the New Testament. Paul's letter to Philemon is illustrative of many features of slavery in those days! Paul had found Onesimus in Rome, the great refuge for runaway slaves.

When Christ said that "it is easier for a camel to enter in through a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God," he was passing judgment not only upon a certain rich young ruler, but upon the selfish economic spirit of the whole Roman Empire of that day. Davis, in the "Influence of Wealth in Imperial Rome," says, "It may not be prejudice to assert that never was the quest for gold more furious than in the age of the early Caesars. If the great republic is the Land of the Almighty Dollar, *Rex Denarius* was no less potent in the great empire."

At this point it is well to take a look at the religious life of the Roman Empire in New Testament times. There is no need to rehearse the moral conditions of those days, for the New Testament has done that work to perfection. But one single word of caution might be helpful to the hasty student. The New Testament does not say that every inhabitant of the world in the first century was a citizen of Sodom and Gomorrah. Christ commends the faith of the Roman centurion of Capernaum as superior to anything among the Jews. Cornelius was a seeker after the true God, and Jehovah honored him with a special vision. The Syro-Phenician woman, like Jacob, would wrestle with God until he bless her. Christ's comment was that "many shall come from the east and the west and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." Like the world of today, the first century had many good and many bad—it was a world that needed the Savior.

In analyzing the religious life of the Roman Empire in New Testament days, one notices first of all a spirit of religious unrest. The world was dissatisfied with its spiritual ideals. One might almost say that the old gods of Rome were dead. Augustus tried to stem this tide by repairing the old temples and emphasizing their use.

But the people seemed to prefer new gods to old ones. Many gods from every corner of the empire were imported and worshiped. The worship of the old Roman gods was still a civic duty, but the worship of these foreign gods was the expression of a personal belief.

What was happening in Rome upon a great scale was happening in other places in less degree. New elements of worship were being introduced; various faiths were intermingling; and all religions were being modified. The mystery religions of Greece were attracting the more cultured as their devotees. But it was especially the eastern religions that appeared to be on a campaign of world conquest. While above all, the politico-religious worship of the Roman emperor was destined to be a tremendous factor. In short, the religious life of the world seems to have been in a state of flux and most men were conscious that they were walking upon spiritual quicksands.

In the midst of these spiritual quicksands was one solid rock—the Jewish church. It was by no means perfect; graft was often the way to its highest offices; hypocrisy was the soul of many of its chief men; and its Sanhedrin was the most bitter opponent of Christ and the church. But in spite of all this there was still a spiritual Israel, that had the power to attract men who were looking for God. The centurion at Capernaum and the Ethiopian eunuch are proofs that spiritually minded Gentiles could find peace through the Jewish church.

Indeed these proselytes were a numerous body. Paul finds them scattered everywhere. When Peter preached on the day of Pentacost he addressed both Jews and proselytes. One of the first deacons was a proselyte of Antioch. A second point to be noted then in the religious life of the early Roman Empire is the Jewish church as a rallying point for spiritually minded men.

But even the non-spiritual part of the Jewish church was a blessing in one way to the early Christian church. For wherever there was a Jewish pulpit (be the congregation good, bad or indifferent) there was a chance to preach Christ. Paul eagerly seized this opportunity in every new community; it was an ideal way to get Chris-

tianity before the people. It is true, these Jewish pulpits were soon closed against him, but not before he had used them to the fullest advantage.

The Jewish church aided Christianity still further. The fact that Christianity was of the Jews and was first preached from their synagogues led the Romans to consider it simply as a peculiar phase of the Jewish faith, which was one of the "licensed religions" of the empire. At Corinth the Jews tried to convince Gallio, the procounsul of Achaia, that Christianity was a separate religion from Judaism, but they failed in the attempt. Thus the acquittal of Paul was really a legal victory for Christianity. Paul's insistence upon being tried before Caesar may have been in some degree due to a desire to put Christianity upon a proper legal footing throughout the empire. At any rate the first century had almost reached its close before a Roman emperor made any extensive persecution of the Christians. (Nero's persecution seems to have been simply a temporary political expedient and was confined to the imperial city.)

The third great religious influence in the Roman Empire was the Christian church itself (although it did not come into being until the century was almost one-third gone). Its magnificent power and influence is familiar to every reader of the New Testament. But we must not dwell long upon this point, for soon we would find ourselves forced to reverse the general theme of the paper and speak of the New Testament influence in the Roman Empire. We have arrived at the climax. From this point on the church is the contributor and the empire is the recipient.