Roman History in New Testament Times

I. From Republic to Empire

About 500 B.C. Rome became, at least nominally, a republic. From time to time strong leaders arose, but an ever-present fear of autocratic power preserved intact the form, and to a surprising extent the fact, of republican government. However, during the two centuries prior to the birth of Christ social and political problems that followed in the wake of conquest made the far-flung empire ever more difficult to administer on the basis of a form of government that had proved at least more or less satisfactory in the days when Roman interests were confined to Italy.

By the first century B.C., these social and political complexities called for a change in the political structure of the state and thus paved the way for a contest of power among the national leaders of the day. But, as yet, none of the contestants dared assume the title of a monarch. It was popular fear that Julius Caesar aspired to assume the title and prerogatives of that office that led to his assassination on the ides of March, 44 B.C. That event precipitated a state of anarchy that continued for nearly fifteen years and that, at other times, would have been the signal for the collapse of Roman power. That such a result did not follow must be attributed to the fact that there remained no tributary people or foreign foe energetic enough to rebel against Roman authority. The provinces remained supine in this moment of political prostration. Though impaired by a thousand buses, the Roman financial structure remained intact during this crucial period. What was left of the ancient, solid Roman character and of Roman legal and administrative skill on the lower levels, particularly in the municipalities, must be credited with saving Rome as a nation and as a world government. In spite of internal turmoil, the iron republic stood.

The Second Triumvirate.—A Second Triumvirate—that is, a government by three men—was formed in the vacuum left by the First Triumvirate (see Vol. V, p. 37), or, more particularly, by the death of Julius Caesar. Antony, a partisan of Caesar's, took possession of his dead colleague's wealth and the leadership of his troops in the vicinity of Rome. Caesar's grandnephew and heir, Octavian, then a youth of eighteen, asserted his rights, and by an unexpected display of political acumen succeeded in counteracting the growing power of Antony. Eventually, these men accommodated their differences and formed an alliance which included Lepidus, another rising political figure. This alliance became known as the Second Triumvirate. By mutual agreement Octavian, who had taken the name Julius Caesar Octavianus, was granted control of Italy and some western provinces. Lepidus was assigned other provinces in the West, while Antony received Greece and the East. This arrangement was functioning by 42 B.C., and was legalized by a docile and helpless Senate.

The political maneuvers which followed were of no benefit to Rome, and did not achieve a monopoly of power for any of the rivals. Lepidus was rendered politically impotent in 36 B.C., and the struggle for power narrowed down to Octavian in the West and Antony in the East. Antony made his headquarters in Egypt, which was still under the rule of the ancient house of Ptolemy, in the person of the beautiful Cleopatra. The queen governed Egypt as her own personal property, and was rearing, for an uncertain future, her children by a younger brother-husband, and a son by Julius Caesar. The rift between Octavian and Antony was widened by the latter's divorce of his wife Octavia, Octavian's sister, and his subsequent marriage to Cleopatra. It was now feared that Antony purposed to make himself king of Rome, with the foreign Cleopatra as his queen.

The Supremacy of Octavian.—When Octavian felt himself strong enough he moved against Antony and soundly defeated him in the great naval battle of Actium, off the western coast of Greece, in 31 B.C. During the battle Cleopatra withdrew her ships and returned to Egypt. Antony followed her, leaving his generals to extricate themselves as best they could.

The way to supreme power now lay open to Octavian, a young man of about thirty. He invaded Egypt the following year and defeated Antony's forces. Antony committed suicide, and Cleopatra, failing in the effort to bring Octavian, in turn, under the power of her charms, later did likewise. Following the example of the Pharaohs and Ptolemies before him, Octavian took over Egypt as his personal estate. Victory over the last of his competitors raised him to an unassailable position of power, and the stage was set for the formal transition from republic to empire.

II. Octavian, Emperor Augustus (27 B.C.—A.D. 14)

As Octavian gathered together the strands of empire, he took care to legitimize every step in his rise to political power. He maintained the forms of republican government and at first made no attempt to claim the imperial dignity, though he now was emperor in fact. In January, 27 B.C., he was granted the title of Augustus, a term that expressed both awe and gratitude for his remarkable achievements. In the same year he received a ten-year imperium over the provinces that made him commander in chief of Roman military forces, and inasmuch as control of the army constituted the actual basis of imperial power (see Vol. V, p. 38), historians date the beginning of the imperial phase of Roman history from this year. Until 23 B.C. the Senate voted him the office of consul annually, but in that year he was accorded supreme proconsular command, and received the tribunician authority (see Vol. V, p. 237). These powers were renewed periodically. Thus he gathered the strands of power into his own hands.

Nevertheless, Augustus continued to rule through republican forms. The consulates were retained, as were also the tribunates. The Senate continued the motions of governing, and Augustus left to proconsuls, who were answerable to the Senate, the governing of the more submissive provinces. These proconsuls were the "deputies" of the book of Acts (see chs. 13:7, 8, 12; 18:12; 19:38). But Augustus' consular authority gave him actual power over all the provinces.

The governing of restive areas Augustus kept in his own hand. In these provinces he appointed legates as his agents; the governor of Syria was a legate of Augustus. He also appointed procurators as his financial agents in all the provinces. In some smaller areas a procurator was the administrator. The NT governors of Judea (Matt. 27:2; Acts 23:24) were procurators, answerable to the emperor, but also to some extent responsible to the legate of Syria.

Under the republic the Comitia, or popular assembly, had been intended as a balance to the aristocratic Senate. In practice the Senate came to have the supreme governing power for the provinces, while the Comitia exercised local jurisdiction over the city. Under Augustus, however, the Comitia became only a form, and under Tiberius, his successor, was reduced to a shadow. Legislative power had been reserved for the Senate, but even that body was subservient to the emperor.

Upon the death of Lepidus, in B.C. 13, Augustus became Pontifex Maximus, the chief priest of the state religion. This was a position of great political significance, principally because of its control over the calendar, and hence, indirectly, of the timing of elections.

He now held in his hand the most important religious, military, and civil powers; no more were necessary.

The reign of Augustus was prosperous and successful. In fact, it saved Rome from disintegration. The empire was well and firmly governed. The famous Pax Romana, or Roman peace, was maintained in a vast empire of diverse peoples by a standing army of probably not less than 250,000. Concerning this period M. Rostovtzeff comments: "The danger of foreign invasion had disappeared; … even the frontier provinces ceased to fear the irruption of neighbouring tribes. And thus the prestige of Augustus, as the defender and guardian of the state, rose to an unassailable height" (*A history of the Ancient World,* vol. 2, p. 197).

Except for the matter of the imperial succession, the civil constitution of Rome was on a firm footing. The extension of citizenship was restricted. The manumission of slaves was put under careful regulation, for the sake of the labor market and of public order. Marriage laws were recodified and bachelorhood was penalized. The various measures Augustus took for the stabilization of society saved Rome, for the time being, from complete moral decay and national dissolution.

During his reign Augustus encouraged a return to religion. This was perhaps not for the benefit of religion itself, nor for the sake of the old gods of Rome, in whom Augustus and his advisers probably had no particular confidence. It was rather the result of a feeling that respect for the gods and the observance of religious rites was good for men individually as well as for society as a whole.

Taxation.—Before Augustus, that is, under the republic, the taxation system of the Roman government in the provinces was through *publicani*. These were men engaged in collecting tax monies from the municipalities outside Italy. Each *publicanus* contracted to furnish the provincial government with a certain amount of money from his district. It was then for him to obtain that sum from the district, plus whatever amount he could obtain as his own personal profit and income. Under Augustus the taxation system was reformed so that the direct taxes no longer were farmed out to *publicani*, although the collection of some indirect taxes may have continued to be at their disposal. The "publicans" mentioned in the New Testament were evidently not Roman officials, but minor tax collectors employed by Herod Antipas. They are classed simply and directly as sinners, men hated and scorned by the populace of Palestine (see Matt. 9:9–11). See Vol. V, p. 66.

Communications.—The history-making quality of transportation must not be overlooked. The power of the Roman Empire, and the magnificent control of the legions over that empire, the largest in area yet seen by men, must be understood in terms of the great Roman system of roads.

Long before Rome was using the sea to reach its captured and allied provinces, it was building roads to connect the city with the towns and provinces of Italy. Local materials were abundantly available. The tufa rock, which proved so efficient for houses and public buildings, was also found useful for road construction. On a deep rough stone base, which was covered with gravel and sand, blocks of tufa were laid and, where the expected use warranted it, were cemented in place. Near the cities, especially Rome, where traffic was heavy, the paving surface was slabs of granite. The middle part of the road was raised like a dyke or terrace, and was used for privileged or rapid transport,

whereas the tracks at the sides were for local or slower traffic. The roads cut through hills and even mountains, and passed, by arches, over gorges and narrow valleys, to speed the traveler on his way.

Gaius Gracchus, the leader of the popular revolt of 133 B.C., is credited with building up the roadway system in Italy after he succeeded his brother to power. As the limits of Roman power were pushed through every point of the compass, roads from the city center reached to the very outskirts of the empire.

A system of posts, reserved for use of government agents only, was established by Augustus. The post houses, each with forty horses in it, were some five or six miles apart. By means of the posted horses a messenger could travel the then remarkable distance of one hundred miles or more a day. Under Emperor Nerva (96–98), the posts were opened for general use, and the expense was met by the imperial treasury. Hadrian (117–138) extended this privilege throughout the empire, but later rulers added the care of the roads to the "common duties"—the upkeep of aqueducts, levies for messenger service, and charges for armies passing through—that already lay heavily upon the municipalities.

These far-flung arteries were primarily intended for the swift movement of troops to guard the life lines of the empire or to defend its borders. Consequently, whatever else may have traveled these roads, there was always the heavy tread of the legionaries' feet. In addition, of course, there journeyed the great and the humble, the busy and the leisurely, on horseback or on donkeys, in litters or on foot, in swift chariots or in rumbling wagons. Among such travelers, the first century of the Christian Era must have seen Paul, Peter, and the other apostles employing the convenience of the Roman road, along with the peace of a unified empire, for the fulfillment of their missionary designs.

Rome's Weakness and Strength.—When he contrasts the peace and prosperity of the reign of Augustus with the near anarchy of the whole preceding century (see Vol. V, pp. 36, 37), the student of history is compelled to note how near Rome was to the verge of political, economic, and social collapse when Augustus took the reins of the government firmly into his hands (see Vol. V, pp. 37, 38). Only the Roman legions remained a potent force for unity. Yet the soldiers no longer took their oath of allegiance (*sacramentum*) to the Roman state, but to their commanding general (*imperator*), who, by personal magnetism and leadership, led them to victory, with its prospects of plunder and booty. Another stabilizing factor was the basic respect for law on the part of the people, decadent though they were in comparison with their ancestors. Despite the venality and corruption of government officials, they sensed the importance of law and possessed a natural genius for administration.

Undoubtedly the strong rule of Julius Caesar and the reforms he instituted also helped to delay the process of decay. The momentum of his rule carried over until Augustus was able to consolidate his control. Similarly, the momentum of Augustus strength carried the state through the vicissitudes that accompanied a forlorn parade of inefficient emperors, to the brighter periods of such rulers as Vespasian (69–79) and Marcus Aurelius (161–180). The reign of the latter was truly remarkable and may rightly be called a golden age in spite of the progressive decline of Roman civilization. The influence of this golden era helped to carry the empire through the reigns of a series of upstart tyrants until the strong reigns of Diocletian (284–305) and Constantine (306–337) gave Rome a new lease on life.

Little good can be said of most of the men who succeeded to the imperial throne within the century after Augustus' death. One of the reasons for this situation lay in the fact that no clear, consistent plan of succession had been formulated. This lack was inherent in the situation. All of Augustus' governmental powers (see Vol. V, p. 38) were personal. Legally, the office of emperor did not even exist. Augustus sought to perpetuate his accumulation of powers by means of a father-son succession of sorts. Inasmuch as he had no son of his own, and younger relatives who might have succeeded him all died early, he chose to adopt his stepson, Tiberius, in spite of a certain dislike for him.

Augustus' death left Tiberius as the only plausible candidate for the imperial post. The arrangements necessary to secure his enthronement reveal the weakness of the imperial constitution. Later emperors similarly sought to provide for a successor by the adoption of a relative. But this procedure failed to establish a stable imperial line. Instead, during the first century of the empire,it brought pitifully weak men to the rulership of the world. With the beginning of the 2d century the emperors selected successors on the basis of personal merit rather than blood relationship, with the result that more capable men were invested with the imperial dignity.

III. Tiberius (A.D. 14–37)

Augustus' successor, Tiberius,is spoken of favorably by some of his contemporatries, unfavorably by even more of them. Except for some successful military campaigns, which he did not lead in person, his reign must be reckoned as weak. No matter how hard he worked, and no matter how conscientious he sought to be, he shows little evidence that he understood his time. He ruled mechanically, according to set standards borrowed, in part, from his early experience in army camp. He was never able to overcome the besetments of poor advisers and gossips.

One of the unfortunate features of his reign was the was that judicial accusation became a matter of course. There was no process of public prosecution. Accusation became a profession. Any citizen who witnessed or suspected a violation of law, or who wished to involve someone in such a charge, could duly report it and have the offender prosecuted. There grew up under Tiberius a class of professional accusers, called delators, who accused anyone who might happen to offend them. Though it was, of course, a travesty of justice, Tiberius lent his support to the system. Curiously enough, this practice worked against the emperor himself, for he became the victim of the most unpleasant stories. Partly because of this situation his reputation has suffered seriously at the hands of historians.

The Army.—The power of the Roman army was remarkable. For some time the legions had been made up of professional soldiers, who enlisted for twenty years. It has already been noted that the allegiance of the soldiery was centered more in their commanding general than in Roman government. However, the soldiers were well trained and fought devotedly. The morale of the army was excellent, again and again proving superior to the spirit and skill of enemy forces. Under Augustus and Tiberius it became the custom to station legions permanently at strategic points throughout the empire, along the border and in conquered provinces. It is known that in the year A.D. 23 twenty-five legions of regular Roman soldiers held the empire in excellent military control. The upper and lower Rhine regions were each held by four legions, while in Spain there were only three. North Africa, apart from Mauretania, which was a tributary kingdom with its own soldiery, was held by two legions; and Egypt needed only two. In

Palestine and Syria there were four legions. Thrace was a tributary kingdom, and had its own soldiers. There were two legions in the lower Danube, two in Moesia, and two in Dalmatia. This total of twenty-five legions was augmented by about the same number of auxiliary troops, making a total of around 250,000 men, based on 5,000 to a legion. These were made up almost entirely of heavy infantry, though a few had cavalry contingents. The also had its engineering corps, for the Romans had developed an efficient type of siege machinery. Each aggregation of legions, comprising an army, was under the command of a general officer, or *imperator*, and each legion was led by a legate. The legion, in its turn, consisted of some fifty centuries, each of which contained from fifty to one hundred men under the command of an officer known as a centurion.

Religion.—In the early days of his reign Tiberius endeavored to improve the religious life of his people. To this end he expelled the cult of Isis, because of the moral abuses that were a feature of worship in this cult. He also ordered the discontinuance of Jewish worship in Italy, and actually commanded the expulsion of all Jews from that country. (For a discussion of Tiberius and the Jews see Vol. V, pp. 65, 66). He endeavored to destroy the cult of the astrologers. This numerous class studied the sun, the moon, and the five visible planets, and sought by incantations to secure divine aid from the gods who were supposed to inhabit these heavenly bodies (cf. Vol. I, pp. 212, 213, and Vol. IV, p. 763). However, the efforts of Tiberius to suppress the astrologers were unsuccessful, and in the latter years of his reign he himself became a devotee of their mysteries. He consulted them constantly, and became increasingly pessimistic and gloomy under the influence of their counsels.

Civil Administration.—There were no marked accessions of territory under Tiberius, but he did much to consolidate control of the outlying provinces. Thrace was placed under a Roman governor, and was presently annexed. When Archelaus, king of Cappadocia, died in A.D. 17, his kingdom was made a province under a procurator; at the same time, the kingdom of Commagene, on the eastern frontier, was placed under a propraetor. The restless and wealthy dependency of Judea had been put under a procurator by Augustus (see Vol. V, p. 64), and Tiberius allowed this to continue. Judea was, however, under the wider jurisdiction of Syria, and the procurator of Judea was answerable to the governor of that province, whose capital was at Antioch. Syria itself was surrounded by a circle of somewhat autonomous little states, such as Chalcis, Emesa, Damascus, and Abilene. See The Roman World at the Birth of Jesus.

The first nine years of the reign of Tiberius can be rated as good, and his government successful. But about the year A.D. 23 a definite change occurred. Sejanus, minister of Tiberius, was ambitious, and desired to become emperor in the room of his master. To accomplish this he unhesitatingly formed a variety of political alliances, and endeavored to remove any support that Tiberius might find in the immediate circle of his companions. The personal family of the emperor was not exempt, and when his son Drusus died after a lingering illness, historians of the time were free to say that Sejanus had poisoned him.

Last years of Tiberius.—Tiberius began to reap a grim fruitage from his support of the delators, his faith in the astrologers, and the liberty he gave to his unscrupulous minister Sejanus. The palace was filled with rumors, gossip, and vile stories which did not spare the emperor. The dark prognostications of the astrologers were having the worst kind of effect upon his mind, and the intrigues of Sejanus were threatening Tiberius

himself. Overcome by gloom,by fears for his personal welfare, and by hatred for the very atmosphere of the capital city, Tiberius withdrew altogether, and never again set foot in the city of Rome. He itinerated, but never went far into Italy, and did not go abroad. He spent most of the remaining thirteen years of his reign on the island of Capri.

But even in retirement he did not find peace. His pessimism and his fears pursued him. He was not free from the machinations of Sejanus, whom eventually he had put to death. Tongues did not cease to busy themselves with the emperor, simply because he had withdrawn to a beautiful island; in fact, the tongues were the busier. Since people could not discover the actual facts of Tiberius' private life, stories became rife that he engaged in wild orgies in his villa of retirement.

The aged Tiberius was on a journey when he became sick. He resisted all efforts to give him medical care, and took part as actively as possible in games that were being played in his honor. Finally, however, he had to take to his bed. There he was denied the privilege of dying a natural death. It is said that Macro, the successor of Sejanus, and the father-in-law of Gaius, who was expected to succeed to the throne, made sure of the old emperor's death by stifling him with bedclothes.

IV. Gaius Caligula (A.D. 37–41)

Tiberius' adopted son, Gaius, generally known as Caligula, or "Little Boots," now became emperor. In his youth he had been a friend of Herod Agrippa, grandson of Herod the Great. (For Rome's relationships with the Herods see Vol. 5, pp. 39–41, 63–66, 69). This Palestinian prince had been educated in Rome with other sons of petty kings whose territories had passed under Roman rule. In the capital city he became a friend of Claudius and his young nephew Caligula, both of whom were destined to be emperors. Caligula was a weak, nervous dissipated young man who all too readily accepted Agrippa's tutelage in the despotic ways of the East, and thereby laid an unfortunate foundation for his future exercise of imperial power.

Nevertheless, he began his reign well. A general amnesty was declared, liberating all prisoners and bringing home political exiles. New members for the Senate were recruited from wealthy members of the equestrian class. Many inhabitants of provincial communities received Roman citizenship. It was a period of remarkable prosperity and was decidedly pleasing to the people.

But after his first year Caligula gave himself over to dissipation. Not only did he give the people expensive amusements, forcing even senators to participate in the games; he himself actually descended into the arena to act the part of a gladiator.

It was during Caligula's first year that he made Herod Agrippa ruler of Palestine, as Herod Agrippa I, but kept him in Rome in order to have him near him. Shortly after Agrippa's elevation to the ethnarchy, his uncle Philip died, and Gaius gave him the tetrarchy of Philip, plus Abilene and Coele-Syria. See Palestine Under the Herodians.

Caligula soon claimed to be a god. He demanded that he should be worshiped by all, and had images of himself set up in various communities, one of which was Alexandria in Egypt, where so many Jews were living. The Jews appointed a deputation, under Philo the philosopher, to go to Rome and plead with the emperor not to compel their people to worship his image, since that would be so completely contrary to their religious conscience. The deputation met with Caligula in vain. None of the pleas of Philo availed. The emperor ordered his image to be set up, and commanded that the Jews worship it. He

was on the point of insisting that one be installed also in the Temple in Jerusalem, with the Jews there ready to rebel, when he died in A.D. 41.

Caligula tried to rule. He sought to imitate the Caesars that had preceded him, and to give serious attention to duty. But he had no interest in ruling through republican forms as had Augustus and Tiberius before him. He felt a contempt for the Senate and desired to rule, not as imperator or consul, but as king. He desired to be a builder. He tore down buildings and replaced them with others. He built the huge aqueduct, remains of which still catch the eye of the traveler to the city of Rome. He rebuilt the palace of the Caesars, in truly Oriental extravagance. He began new port facilities for the city of Rome at the mouth of the Tiber, which could have been efficient, but were still unfinished at his death. But he was a spendthrift, and impoverished the treasury, which Tiberius, by his frugality, had kept well filled. He was impetuous, unpredictable, and undoubtedly mentally unbalanced. With his tendency to sportiveness, he showed a cruelty that made him say at one time that he wished the Roman people had but one neck, that he might strike off their common head.

Caligula reigned only four years. His death came through assassination by an officer of the Praetorian cohort whom he had insulted. He was altogether deserted by his friends, and it was left for Herod Agrippa to prepare his body for burial.

When word reached the Senate that Caligula was dead, debate immediately started as to what should be done about the succession. Speeches were made insisting that Rome return to senatorial rule, and that the old ways of the republic be restored. This would have removed the whole problem of imperial succession. There were others, however, who felt that Rome had prospered under the rule of one man, bad as some of the Caesars had been, and that a successor to Caligula should be appointed.

V. Claudius (A.D. 41—54)

Upon hearing of the sudden death of Caligula, the Praetorian soldiers rushed through the palace looking for booty. One of them found Claudius, the uncle of Caligula, now a man of fifty, cowering behind a curtain in the palace, seized him, dragged him out before the other soldiers, and cried with a laugh, “Here is our emperor.” The word spread; the idea took hold; and in a little while the whole Praetorian Guard was united behind Claudius as the emperor of the Roman Empire. Thus it became a fact, and the Roman Senate could but comply. From this time the throne of the empire became an object of military dictatorship. Indeed, it was not long before the right to appoint emperors had passed from the Praetorians into the hands of the Roman soldiery in the field. Actually, in the case of Claudius, the people were already outside the Senate house demanding that the Senate appoint a single head to the empire, and when Claudius’ name was brought before them by the soldiery, the Senate hastened to accept him as emperor. Rome remained under a single head, as a military dictatorship.

Claudius was an odd personality. He was unhappy in childhood, ridiculed by his associates, and despised by members of his family. Not having normal, pleasant associations with his equals, he was driven to fraternize with menials, and spent most of his life in retirement. He had given his time to study, especially to the study of history; he wrote copiously, was interested in drama, and was an antiquarian of sorts. He knew a great about what had happened to Rome in the past, but was certainly out of touch with the Rome of his own time.

Civil Administration.—Claudius sought to show himself a considerate ruler. He granted amnesty to political prisoners and exiles. Confiscations were relinquished. Temples were restored, and statues that had been taken from them were returned, particularly those that had been removed to make room for the statues of Caligula. He had some troops moved across the borders in places where military strength was needed, and became noted for the Roman colonies he established in various provinces throughout the empire.

One of the important things that Claudius accomplished was a reorganization of the Senate. He had the courage to remove members who were unable to carry the financial burden a senatorship involved. He then filled up the rolls with knights wealthy enough to meet the senatorial standards, many of these knights being drawn from the provinces. This made the Senate a more truly representative body, and helped the empire to be, not the appendage of a great municipality, but a vast political entity, centered in a capital, with associated cities and provinces assisting in imperial government.

A census held in A.D. 47 showed that there were nearly 7,000,000 citizens in the empire. This was a large increase over the census of A.D. 14, which recorded some 5,000,000 citizens. It revealed how the times of comparative peace and prosperity since Augustus had helped the growth of population. It also indicated a wide extension of citizenship throughout the empire. To this figure of 7,000,000, the number of women and children of these citizens must be added, bringing the total of Roman citizens and their dependents to about 20,000,000 souls, according to Gibbon's estimate. Again, to this figure must be added the large, unnumbered body of provincials who did not hold citizenship, and the hordes of slaves who populated the Roman world. Although Gibbon's estimate of 120,000,000 people as the total population at the middle of the 1st century doubtless is too high, the figure probably did stand somewhere between 80,000,000 and 100,000,000 souls (see Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* J. B. Bury, ed., vol. 1, p. 42).

Claudius, because of his antiquarian interests, was a true Roman in heart and spirit. There was around his court less of a foreign atmosphere. His attitude toward foreign peoples, that is, non-Romans, was considerate, but he was on the watch for evidence that these peoples were not thoroughly loyal. The Jews were tolerated, and apparently were treated rather more kindly than they had been under Tiberius. However, revolts broke out among them, and as a result Claudius issued an edict expelling the Jews from Rome (see Vol. V, p. 71). Among those thus displaced were Aquila and Priscilla, Jews with whom Paul became acquainted when he preached in Corinth on his Second Missionary Journey (see Acts 18:2).

The industry of Claudius in his endeavor to be an efficient emperor was amazing. He was at his desk early in the morning and late at night. He spent hours in the Forum, personally acting as judge for his people. They flocked around him, telling him their problems, and demanding his aid in their solution. Oftentimes when he would rise to leave, they would insist that he remain until every case was heard. He was industrious in a building program, largely in completing the works begun by Caligula. The new port at Ostia, so useful to Rome since silt was filling up the mouth of the Tiber, was successfully finished. He completed the huge aqueduct that Caligula had started, and was able to bring to completion a great tunnel for conducting water into Rome. Britain was completely

subjugated, and one of its leaders, Caractacus, was brought to Rome in triumph. Druidism was suppressed in Gaul, and to a large extent in Britain.

Claudius spent time and money in the entertainment of the Roman populace, but it was clear to those who knew him, and perhaps was sensed by the multitude, that what he did was from a sense of duty, as though the antiquarian were carrying on the old Roman routine rather than genuinely entering into the life of the people. But the treasury was exhausted. There was a shortage of grain, and the people blamed the emperor for this. The harder he worked to solve his people's problems, the more responsible he became for their troubles, and this prevented him from ever becoming a popular ruler.

Personal Life.—Moreover, he was self-indulgent, and the older he became, the more he was given to intemperance, of both cup and platter. He worked indefatigably, as has been noted, and then would overeat in anxious effort to restore his failing strength. His health gradually deteriorated, and the intrigues and evils of palace life accelerated the process.

Claudius was married four times. His third marriage, that with Messallina, was particularly revolting. Her moral conduct was not above suspicion, and according to a story current at the time, she actually went through a wedding ceremony with one of her paramours. Messallina was put to death as a result of her infidelities. Claudius then married his own niece, Agrippina, who schemed to have her son Nero succeed to the emperorship when his stepfather should die. This meant the setting aside of Claudius' own son, who was shortly put to death. Agrippina soon became tired of waiting for the death of her husband, which would open the way of Nero to take the throne, and finally arranged for Claudius to be poisoned. He swallowed her first poisonous potion, but whether because of his having overeaten or because of the quantity of wine he had drunk, it failed to take effect. A physician called in by Agrippina put a poisoned feather down the emperor's throat, apparently under the pretense of bringing him some gastronomic relief. Claudius gradually sank into a stupor and died from the effect of the venom thus applied., Nero succeeded. The date was A.D. 54.

VI. Nero (A.D. 54—68)

The new emperor's family had long been prominent in the affairs of Rome, having come up from the plebeian class some two hundred years before his time. Among the clan had been consuls, a Pontifex Maximus, and several generals. Nero's own father was charged with many crimes—incest, adultery, murder, and treason. He married Agrippina, sister of Caligula, and their child, Lucius Domitius, is the Nero of history. The father died when Nero was but three years of age, his mother was sent into exile, and an aunt became his guardian. Caligula seized the child's patrimony, but Claudius later restored it.

The boy's education included much that was harmful. He knew good manners, court etiquette, his rights and prerogatives, but he was only too well versed in the vices and corruptions of the day. His was the misfortune of many a well-born Roman youth: his training had been left to poorly supervised menials. An exception to this was his tutelage by Seneca. This tutor, a brother of Gallio, who was proconsul of Achaia when Paul was at Corinth (Acts 18:12), was born into a family of teachers, and grew to be a philosopher, shrewd in material things. He knew how to retain influential friends and benefit by their friendship. His principles were good, obtained from the Stoicism he professed. He knew how to live in an evil day and place, while keeping himself unsullied. That he had upon Nero a good influence, which carried over into the earlier years of the new reign, is

evident. It is equally obvious that his influence was neither good enough nor weighty enough. The boy's own bad traits, the pampering he had suffered, and the corruptions around him were more than Seneca had the ability, or perhaps the will, to overcome.

Another of Nero's early favorites was Burrus, a praetorian prefect with long experience at court. Burrus was a man of native shrewdness, of discipline, and of moral sensibility surprising for one in his position.

Nero had obsessions. He feared his mother. He feared Britannicus, the son of Claudius, whom Agrippina had managed to set aside while she pushed forward her own son. But when Nero was presented by Burrus to the Praetorians as the fit successor to Claudius, they acclaimed him, and there was then no power that could dispute that approval, certainly not the supine Senate. Nero was about seventeen years of age when he was made emperor.

Agrippina now took on the role of an empress, in which Nero cooperated. She rode in the imperial litter with her son, gave counsel, received embassies. She engaged poisoners to remove certain ones who seemed to be in her way. She sought completely to dominate the youthful emperor, her son. To counteract this maternal control, Seneca and Burrus agreed to retain their own influence by yielding to Nero's will. They thought that the most effective guidance could be given while they were submitting to his whims. Thus, in the early years, Nero's path went gradually downward.

Many of his acts were deliberately evil. He had Britannicus poisoned. He deserted his wife Octavia for a mistress, whereupon Agrippina took the rejected Octavia under her own protection. He removed Pallas, a freedman who had been minister to Claudius, and a client of Agrippina's. Attracted by the plaudits of the multitude, he exhibited himself carelessly in the circus and the theater, and actually engaged in petty street thievery and brawls while all too poorly disguised. The best thing to be said about Nero is that he left the affairs of government to his ministers. Seneca and Burrus kept the Senate thoroughly informed in all governmental matters, and thus secured a bulwark against the wrath of Nero's mother. Nero sat as a public judge, and actually sought to be fair in his judgments. He ignored the jeers which in recent years had been often directed against the throne by an insolent populace. For such reasons his earlier years seemed tolerable, especially when compared with the latter part of his reign.

The year A.D. 58 marked a change for the worse in the emperor. The first event in this second period was his falling in love with Poppaea, the dissolute wife of his court favorite Otho. When it was seen that Otho would oppose Nero's familiarities with his wife, he was given a post in Lusitania (approximately modern Portugal) in order that he might not interfere. The next event, and one that doubtless was a result of Poppaea's evil influence, was the assassination of Nero's mother Agrippina. The emperor feared what might be the consequences of this horrible act, but when he re-entered Rome after his mother's death, he was received with most extravagant adulation by senators and people alike. Thereafter the emperor showed himself extremely egotistical, but at the same time feeble and vacillating, superstitious and cowardly, self-indulgent and lecherous, and dangerous in temper toward those around him. He yielded himself increasingly to the most flagrant and corrupt dissipations. Into these dissipations he seduced both nobles and commoners by giving public suppers where open immorality was practiced and encouraged. It seemed that the very populace was being seduced into complete corruption.

Burrus and Seneca continued to act as Nero's ministers, but with declining influence. Evil men, one named Tigellinus and another Rufus, were rising in favor. In A.D. 62 Burrus died, perhaps poisoned. Seneca sought unsuccessfully to withdraw to private life. Nero publicly repudiated Octavia, then put her to death most cruelly and married Poppaea. Now, with the treasury empty because of the emperor's debaucheries, men were put out of the way in order that their wealth might be confiscated.

The Burning of Rome.—This tragic holocaust, the best-known event of Nero's reign, occurred in A.D. 64. Of the fourteen regions into which the city was organized, only four escaped, three were completely consumed, the other seven were more or less severely damaged. Some of the most famous edifices of the city were destroyed, both public buildings and palaces. Even Nero's palace was scorched. Thousands of the commoner folks' houses and warrenlike tenements in the poorer districts were wiped out. Priceless works of art were destroyed and writings of great legal and historical value were undoubtedly consumed.

It may be true that Nero had the fire started as a backdrop to his pseudotragic recital of the epic *Sack of Troy*. There is no particular reason for rejecting the idea. There were other stories. It was said that he had merely prevented efficient efforts to stop the fire. According to another account he had set the fire because he wished an opportunity to rebuild the city magnificently, and to name the restored city after himself.

If Nero had caused or permitted the fire, he overreached himself. He sensed this, and expiation was made in special offerings to the gods. Still the survivors of the fire muttered. "Neither human help," says Tacitus, a Roman historian writing about one hundred years after the birth of Christ, "nor imperial munificence, nor all the modes of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order" (*Annals* xv. 44; Loeb ed., *Tacitus,* vol. 4, p. 283).

Persecution of the Christians.—What was Nero to do? He must find someone upon whom to blame the disaster. He found the scapegoat in the illegal sect of Christians, who by that time had doubtless arrived at some considerable strength in the city. According to Tacitus: "Therefore, to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, loathed for their vices, whom the crowd styled Christians. Christus, the founder of the name, had undergone the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by sentence of the procurator Pontius Pilatus, and the pernicious superstition was checked for a moment, only to break out once more, not merely in Judaea, the home of the disease, but in the capital itself, where all things horrible or shameful in the in the world collect and find a vogue" (*ibid.*). So much for the opinion of Tacitus. He proceeds then to describe Nero's persecution of the Christians:

"First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their disclosures, vast numbers were convicted, not so much on the count of arson as for hatred of the human race. And derision accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed, were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the habit of a charioteer, or mounted on his car. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a sentiment of pity, due to the impression that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the ferocity of a single man"
(*ibid.*, pp. 283–285).

Peter and Paul.—This persecution by Nero, which began in A.D. 64, was not an expression of any governmental policy concerning the Christians. It arose from Nero's own whim and caprice—and as a way of escape for himself. The persecution was severe,

but just how severe it is impossible now to measure. Suetonius, a contemporary of Tacitus, says that "punishment was inflicted on the Christians, a class of men given to a new and mischievous superstition" (*Nero* vi. 16; Loeb ed., *Suetonius,* vol. 2, p. 111). There can be no question that hundreds of Christians suffered martyrdom in the city of Rome, and there may also have been outbreaks against them in the provinces. None of the pagan writers refers to Peter or Paul by name, but early Christian authors are united in referring the martyrdom of these apostles to the time of Nero, and in Rome. Among these are Tertullian (died c. A.D. 230; *Against Marcion* iv. 5), and Eusebius (c. A.D. 325; *Ecclesiastical History* ii. 25 [5, 6]).

The old Mamertime dungeon on the fringe of the Roman Forum, not far from the old Senate house, is still pointed out to tourists as the spot where Paul is supposed to have been imprisoned. The date of his death can be placed probably between A.D. 66 and 68, the year in which Nero himself died. According to an ancient tradition Peter followed him in martyrdom, crucified head downward (see Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* iii. 1; cf. AA 537, 538).

Nero's Death.—While sporadic persecution of the Christians in Rome was continuing, Nero was busy rebuilding the city. Streets were laid out anew, and buildings were erected, with many touches of beauty and artistic development. Vast sums of money were spent on the reconstruction, money which had to come from the wealthy people of the provinces and from heavy taxation.

But this did not pacify the people. Now it was no longer a case of murmuring among the rabble. The nobility, the social and the economic leaders of Roman life, were determined that there should be a change in government. One of the more elaborate plots was detected, the conspirators were brought to trial, convicted, and put to death. Among then was Nero's old friend and mentor, Seneca, who had sought in vain to withdraw from public life and to escape from the city of Rome and its dangers by retirement. Now Nero was able to include him in a list of conspirators, and he died as a criminal.

In the last few years of his life Nero had become more profligate, more undependable, more dissipated, more evil. His baseless egotism seemed to know no bounds. His early pretensions as a poet and artist continued to the end. Even before the burning of Rome he had decided that he would take a trip to the East. His plans in this direction were interrupted by his anxiety to see that Rome was rebuilt. At last, in the year 66, he set out, and was gone for nearly two years. His tour was a public exhibition of depraved and corrupt vanity. Upon his return he made a triumphal entry into Rome, but that did not distract the public, and particularly the nobles, from their discontent.

Nero now received news of serious defections among the provincial generals. Galba, stationed in Spain, was especially mentioned, for Vindex, prefect of one of the Gallic provinces, made overtures to him to become emperor. Galba hesitated to participate in the conspiracy, but Vindex developed the plot. Nero managed to have Vindex declared a public enemy, but by then Galba was determined to go through with the conspiracy. The people were clamoring against Nero, the senators stood aloof from him, and the Praetorians refused him protection. He fled from Rome, whereupon the Senate proclaimed him a public enemy and decreed his death. As Nero lay in a miserable house by the roadside, he held a weapon to his breast, and a slave struck it home. Just as he was dying, the soldiers arrived to take him prisoner. The tyrant perished in disgrace at the age of thirty, after an inglorious reign of fourteen years. The date was A.D. 68.

VII. From Galba to Hadrian (A.D. 68—138)

Nero's Successors, A.D. 68, 69.—Soon Galba, the imperator of Spain, was elected by his soldiers to fill the place of Nero. This was the first time an emperor had been appointed by his soldiers in the field, away from Rome. In this choice also, Rome found itself turning away from the old Julian family, which thus far had furnished all the Caesars. Galba set out for Rome. There were, of course, other aspirants, and he had a number of conspiring nobles put to death, some without a trial. The new emperor was determined not to wield the imperial authority alone, and accepted the nomination of a noted Roman by the name of Piso to be his associate. Acclaimed by the Senate, the appointment of Piso deeply offended Otho, once the husband of Nero's wife Poppaea. Otho, himself a general, won over some of the soldiers, and then was brought before the Praetorian Guard, who hailed him as emperor. The soldiers deserted Galba, and when he and Piso appeared in the Forum, Galba was assassinated forthwith, and, shortly after, Piso suffered the same fate.

Word of this confusion and bloodletting reached Gaul, where the legate Vitellius accepted the pleas of the soldiers that he be emperor. The legions of Gaul and Germany united behind him, and he proceeded toward Rome. Otho met Vitellius in northern Italy, and in the ensuing battle was killed and his army defeated. Vitellius marched on the capital, where the powerless Senate acclaimed him emperor.

In the meantime another candidate had arisen in the person of Vespasian, then serving as legate of Judea. His family was practically unknown, but he himself had successfully fulfilled important responsibilities. He had been legate of a legion in Britain and eventually held a consulship. In the last years of Nero's life severe disorders had broken out in Palestine, and Vespasian had been sent there to crush the Jewish revolt. While he was fulfilling that commission, the army of the East proclaimed him emperor. The armies in northern Italy also offered him their loyalty, began to more toward Rome, and defeated the opposing forces of Vitellius. The Senate willingly declared Vespasian emperor. In less than a year had had three successors.

During these important dynastic changes what had happened to the Roman Empire as a whole? Again it must be remarked that there was no great power outside the empire to take advantage of the confusion in Rome. Parthia, the only possible challenger to Roman power, had just suffered a rebuff at Roman hands. There was within the empire no organized party of the "opposition," to move in upon the disturbances. Consequently, the ordinary life of the empire went on in spite of the turmoils at the capital. True, those years were disturbed through which the armies marched on their way to enthrone their respective generals in Rome. The legates, procurators, and proconsuls in some of the provinces were unseated. There was bound to be disturbance of business, particularly as nobles with invested capital were involved in successive governmental changes. But on the whole, life in the empire proceeded just as it had over a hundred years before, when near anarchy accompanied the assassination of Julius Caesar. Commerce continued to move upon the high seas. The farmers went about their work. Legions continued their guard duty, choosing the generals to whom they would remain loyal. With all the corruption, there was a solid stratum in the populace, homes in which fathers and mothers continued to do their duty by their children and to give, foundation to the vital life of their communities. Priests went about their duties in the pagan temples. Devotees of the

mystery cults proceeded with their worship. Christianity continued to grow as a leaven of good among the people.

Vespasian, A.D. 69—79.—Vespasian left Titus, his older son, to continue the subjugation of the rebellious Jews while he proceeded slowly to Rome. His interests in the capital were cared for by Mucianus, legate of Syria, and by Domitian, the emperor's younger son.

Titus ably completed the task begun by his father. Jerusalem was besieged in the spring of A.D. 70, and by the end of August, after bitter resistance, was taken and almost completely destroyed. Titus returned to Rome in triumph, carrying with him thousands of captives and great booty. The Arch of Titus, still standing in Rome, celebrates his victory. (For a detailed description of the Jewish wars and the destruction of Jerusalem see Vol. V, pp. 73–78.)

Just as Vespasian was taking the imperial purple, some of the legions that had supported him in Gaul and lower Germany attempted to sever their relationship with Rome, and form a separate government in the Gallic provinces. However, with a show of force from Mucianus, the legions returned to their duty, and the revolt died out. But since a number of auxiliary legions of a tribal character had entered into this revolt, it became the practice of the Roman government from then on to distribute the tribal auxiliaries in parts of the empire distant from their native lands, in order to minimize the risk of such outbreaks.

When Titus returned from Palestine, Vespasian made him praetorian prefect and gave him the tribunician power—the authority, but not the office, of a tribune. Together they gave sound leadership to the empire. Their main contribution was probably in the realm of finance, where Vespasian's thrift restored the treasury that had been emptied by the extravagances of previous emperors. Several provinces were reorganized, and imperial defense was strengthened as far north as Britain and on the frontiers formed by the Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates rivers. At home impressive building projects lent an air of prosperity to the new regime. The burnt Capitoline Temple was restored, a temple of Peace was erected, and work was begun on the mammoth Colosseum, whose ruins still exist. So stable was Vespasian's rule that when he died in 79 Titus was able to succeed him without disturbance.

Titus, A.D. 79—81.—The son proved a worthy successor to his able father. Unfortunately, his reign was short; thus he was unable to fulfill much of its early promise. Its memory was also darkened by two disasters. In 79, Mt. Vesuvius erupted and buried in its volcanic lava the cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum, whose excavated ruins have provided a rich source of knowledge concerning Roman life in Italy during the 1st century of the Christian Era. One year later Rome again suffered a disastrous fire, which burned for three days and left much of the city in ruins. However, Titus was not blamed for these catastrophes, and when he died in A.D. 81, he was deeply mourned by the empire. His younger brother, Domitian, succeeded without opposition.

Domitian, A.D. 81—96.—The new ruler was genuinely interested in the political, social, and literary life of the empire; but the good he accomplished was hidden under the hatred which his violently autocratic methods aroused. Nevertheless, history records imperial progress under his leadership. He authorized a campaign from Britain into Caledonia (Scotland), and he himself led an army across the Rhine into Germany, where he annexed some of the land lying east of the river. A revolt of two legions stationed at

Mainz was easily put down, and led to the policy of not having more than one legion permanently stationed at any point. A revolt of the German tribes across the lower Danube was put down with more difficulty, and the settlement that Domitian made with them was not lasting.

Early in his reign he enforced respect for the deified emperors, and established a priestly college of the Flaviales for the worship of his dead father and brother. He himself took the title of *dominus et deus* ("lord and god"), and thus intensified emperor worship throughout the empire and contributed to the persecution of the Christian church. It was doubtless at this time that the apostle John was banished to Patmos, and a number of the other disciples are supposed to have been put to death during this reign. How widespread and how severe the persecution was it is impossible now to say, for there is very little about it in the immediate records of the reign. Most of the references to it are in later Christian writings, such as Tertullian's. This persecution does not represent a deliberate imperial policy, but like that of Nero, was a result of the emperor's autocratic attitude, and his resentment toward a body of religionists who refused to come into line with the general conduct of the Roman people. For the same reason he laid his hand heavily upon certain Jews who were still restive from their defeat of a score of years before.

Domitian's reign, which lasted until his assassination in A.D. 96, was marked by increasingly bitter conflicts with the Senate. A number of leading senators were executed on charges of treason, and when the tyrant died, his name was erased from the official records by the Senate and his memory cursed.

Nerva, A.D. 96—98.—The conspirators who put Domitian out of the way in the autumn of 96 chose for his successor an elderly senator known as Nerva. He was a man of high character, but was not strong enough to meet the troubles inherited from his predecessor. He therefore adopted Trajan, the legate of upper Germany, to serve with him. As Vespasian had done with Titus, Nerva gave to Trajan the tribunician authority and the *imperium* of a proconsul. Apart from the transfer of the costs of the government postal services from the cities to the imperial treasury and a decision to give state aid to orphans, there is little to record in Nerva's reign. When he died in 98 Trajan succeeded him.

Trajan, A.D. 98—117.—The new emperor was a native of Italica in Spain, and was the first ruler to be chosen from the provinces. He proved to be a good choice. His character was sound, he had high administrative talent, was a successful general, and soon gained the respect and affection of his people. Under his rule orderly government flourished, the soldiery were kept under control, poor children were fed, agriculture was encouraged, a lavish building program was undertaken, and highways throughout the provinces were improved and extended. Such plans cost money, but finances were placed on a sound basis, and temporarily proved equal to the strains placed upon them.

Much of Trajan's reign was occupied with military campaigns. In two hard wars he added Dacia, north of the Danube, to the list of Roman provinces. Later, from 113 onward, he undertook the conquest of Parthia. This overstepped the boundaries set by Augustus, and many historians feel that Trajan was unwise to attempt such an expansion of Roman territory.

This otherwise prosperous reign was marred by two events. One of these was a serious rebellion of the Jews in North Africa, Cyprus, Egypt, and Mesopotamia. The revolt was serious enough to demand large numbers of Roman soldiers to conquer it. The

loss of life was heavy on both sides. The Jews fought fanatically, and horrible massacres were perpetrated by both the Jews and their enemies, before the revolt was quelled.

The other event was a persecution of the Christians. Trajan enunciated a policy under which they should be suppressed. An interesting and important letter is extant from Pliny the Younger, governor of Pontus, who writes to the emperor that Christianity has so spread in his area that the temples are deserted, and the artisans who are making materials for the worship of the gods find themselves without employment. He states that it has been his policy to call those accused of being Christians before him, and if they admitted their faith, he has been putting them to death. As a result temple worship has been considerably restored.

Trajan replies and approves what Pliny has been doing, but commendably specifies that if anyone is charged with being a Christian, he is not to be prosecuted unless his accuser's name is subscribed to the charge against him, and that those who repudiate their Christian faith are not to be punished. However, death is to be the punishment for one who acknowledges himself, or is proved to be, a Christian (Pliny *Letters* x. 96, 97).

This is the first of a series of definite policies laid down by Roman emperors for the treatment of Christians. This policy was not superseded for 140 years, and thousands of Christians died under it. Only in A.D. 250, under the emperor Decius, was a new policy enunciated which proved much more severe; it aimed at the extermination of the whole church.

Among the Christians who suffered martyrdom under Trajan is the shadowy figure of Ignatius, the leader of the church of Antioch in Syria. According to traditions embodied in late biographies of him, he was arrested and conveyed to Rome. On his way he is supposed to have written a series of epistles. These epistles have created questions that have long troubled scholars. The letters, if genuine, are remarkable proof of the very early establishment of a strong episcopate.

Historians agree that Trajan's reign was one of the best in Rome's long annals. It was a great loss to the empire when he died in Cilicia, on his way back to the capital, in A.D. 117.

Hadrian, A.D. 117—138.—Just before Trajan died he adopted a cousin who is known in history as Hadrian, and this man succeeded him in the emperorship. He was a person of extraordinary energy, deeply interested in art and literature, with a marked appreciation of Hellenism. He keenly felt the responsibilities of government and spent much of his time traveling over the empire. He was not an expansionist, and withdrew the Roman forces from the territories in the East recently acquired under Trajan. He effected a number of administrative reforms and engaged in an active construction program of roads, buildings, and aqueducts. His most important military undertaking was the suppression of another Jewish outbreak that began when he undertook to establish a colony on the site of old Jerusalem. The revolts were sporadic at first, and were dealt with locally, but in 132 the rebellion became better organized, and the army had to be aligned against it. It was not until 135 that the revolt was finally crushed, with great loss of life to the Jews. (For a more complete discussion of the revolt which occurred under the emperor Hadrian see Vol. V, p. 79.)

Hadrian continued the policy of succession through adoption of worthy men, which had been started by Nerva and maintained by Trajan. But we are already beyond the

historical period that is the theme of this article—Roman history in New Testament times.

VIII. Roman Culture, Philosophy, and Religion

Roman Culture.—The culture of Rome was borrowed from Greece. The Romans were not naturally an artistic or poetic people, but rather were practical, legalistic, and militaristic. It was only when they began to experience more leisure in the enjoyment of their territorial acquisitions in the East that they became observant of the Hellenistic culture the Alexandrian Era had lifted out of its Greek setting and spread over most of the Eastern world. This culture pleased the Romans, and they sought to adapt it to their needs. Greek dramatists, poets, painters, sculptors, and philosophers found their way to Rome, were patronized there by senators and men of wealth, and as the years went by Roman intellectuals, stimulated by the beauty and grace of Greek art, began to imitate and Romanize the Greek forms which flourished around them.

Roman Philosophy.—Nowhere was the borrowing of a culture more plainly seen than in Rome's adoption of Greek philosophy. At the dawn of the Christian Era the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle were experiencing a temporary eclipse; but a 3d-century revival of Platonism had a marked effect on the theology of the Alexandrian Christians, Clement and Origen. In its turn, Neo-Platonism became a cultlike rival of Christianity, and gave to Augustine the germ for his doctrine of predestination. Thus paganism's influence continued to reach the world through erroneous teachings in the church.

The Sophists continued to wield their cynical influence. Man, they said, was the measure of all things. Knowledge and truth were therefore relative, and what each man knew became truth to him; hence two opposite propositions could each be true. Pilate's cynical yet pathetic question, "What is truth?" asked of the Lord of truth, and remembered by the theologian John (ch. 18:38), illustrates the predicament of the Sophists. They attracted to themselves large numbers of the pseudo intellectuals who unbecomingly adorned the fringes of Roman higher society.

The Epicurean philosophy was popular in Rome. Its proponents taught that all substance is made up of atoms. Life, mind, soul, and body are formed of atoms. There is, they taught, no past or future for personality, for the atoms of which the soul is constituted are dissipated at death, and continuity of personality is therefore impossible. Hence one should make the most of life while it is experienced. To the stable-minded Epicurean such a teaching meant the satisfaction of goodness and helpfulness, the best in self-expression; to weaker minds it meant self-indulgence and satisfaction of the lowest inclinations. Horace and Lucretius were exponents of Roman Epicureanism.

Woven into the Stoic philosophy was an admirable ethical quality. Its originator was Zeno, a Phoenician, who taught from the *Stoa Poikile*, the "painted porch" in Athens, about 300 B.C. He reduced all force and matter to a oneness of corporeality. Life, he said, is in the *logos*, or divine principle, that pervades all matter. This resulted in a pantheistic concept of God and appeared to bring rationality into the material universe. To find a rational way of life was to find the road of godly order and sense. This was what the Stoics called living according to nature. To do so successfully was to attain virtue, the highest objective of human living. Performing one's duty to the state, to men, and to oneself was the highest expression of virtue. A well-ordered society must grow out of this

way of life. Hence, a strong state, well governed, leading men into the good way, was the optimum condition of society. Paul had met this philosophy, and Epicureanism, on Mars' Hill in Athens (see Acts 17:16–21).

From Nerva, successor of the domineering Domitian, the emperors for the next seventy years were Stoics, who gave to Rome one of its rare "golden" eras. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* has lived on to the present day as stimulating reading. But because they wanted the best for the Stoical state as they conceived it, the Stoic emperors were rigid in their prosecution of the illicit sect of Christians and of the recalcitrant Jews. The Stoics were an ethical challenge to Christianity.

Greek thought and culture, in their cosmopolitan Hellenistic form, conquered warlike, unphilosophic Rome. But they could not save Rome, for Hellenism had not the qualities of a saving way of life. Rome declined—from age, from overreaching, from lack of self-discipline, from failure to be true to the best in itself, from failure, above all, to find God. It adopted Hellenism, ineffectual as that was, but prostituted it. It finally adopted Christianity, but led it into apostasy. Military, economic, political, and ethical decay resulted—the decay of age and corruption.

Primitive Religion.—Roman religion was, at first, a simple system in which fetishism and magic were mingled. The early Romans were animists, and believed that spirits abode in material things such as trees, stones, and some animals and birds, with power to affect the lives of men. Far down in the history of classical Rome the priests still performed divination by observing birds in flight. The English word "auspices" is from the two Latin words *avis*, "a bird," and *specio*, "to behold," referring to the observance of a bird in flight.

This superstitious regard for the things of nature led to the belief that the spirits, or demons, which were generally of an impish nature, must be placated to prevent their mischievous intrusion upon human activities. Accordingly, the rites of religion were performed primarily to secure exemption from interference by demons, and secondarily to secure their help.

The Roman religion therefore developed into a sort of contract between men and the gods. Thus, when the rites of religion were properly carried out, the spirits were supposedly under obligation to protect, or at least not to molest, those who had propitiated them. Roman religion perpetuated this concept long after the spirits toward whom it was directed were forgotten. It is reflected in saint worship.

The spirits of farm and house, lares and penates, were given special attention and were honored by special household rites. Vesta became the goddess of the hearth, and Ceres the goddess of the field. Vulcan was worshipped as the fire spirit. There were, as well, greater and more powerful gods, worshipped on a national basis. Mars, later the god of war, is thought to have been in primitive times an agricultural deity. Jupiter, the sky god, became supreme in the Roman Pantheon.

The Expanded Pantheon.—The pantheon of Roman gods grew as the centuries passed and Roman life became more complex. The tendency was to find objectives for worship in ideas, in concepts, rather than in actual persons. Love, the hearth, maternity, fertility, wealth, political genius, and even the spirit of the city of Rome itself, Roma—all were worshipped. Sometimes these abstractions were personalized, sometimes not.

Foreign influences greatly affected Roman religion. Greek philosophy hastened the destruction of the confidence of the Roman intellectuals in their ancient gods. Skepticism,

either agnostic or atheistic, was widespread, particularly in the decades preceding the birth of Christ. At the same time, many foreign gods were adopted as Roman imperial power expanded. If the gods Rome already revered had brought such prosperity, the addition of the gods of allied or conquered states would, it was thought, bring further benefit. By recognizing foreign gods the Romans also found it easier to secure the loyalty of conquered peoples. In fact, as a matter of policy, Rome was remarkably tolerant toward both the political and the religious practices of conquered peoples, and wherever possible she left these intact.

Only in provinces where resistance persisted were local religions stamped out and Roman forms imposed upon the people. An example of this was in Gaul, where the Druidic priests were accused of keeping the people in a state of restlessness under Roman government. Even in restless Judea, with which Rome had been in alliance for a century, the Jews were permitted to retain their local political system until the popular outcry against Archelaus in A.D. 6 necessitated the substitution of an imperial procurator. Even then Jewish religion, strangely atheistic as it seemed to the Romans because of its lack of images, was permitted to function. Although the Jews refused to pray to Roma, the abstract genius of Rome, or to the government, or to the emperor, they were permitted to maintain their worship of Jehovah provided they pray *for* Rome.

The Mystery Cults.—However, Oriental mystery cults were not accepted so complacently by the Roman authorities. These cults were highly ritualistic and personal. Each mystery cult centered in the worship of a particular deity, such as Dionysus, Bacchus, Isis, the Great Mother (nature personified), or Mithras. The devotee might worship other gods in an incidental way, but most of his devotional activity was directed to the cult god or goddess. After giving needed instruction, the priest of the cult would initiate the devotee, and then step by step and degree lead him deeper into the mysteries of the cult worship. He was supposed to come into more and more intimate knowledge of the god, and, it was believed, would eventually enter the favored experience of mystical union with him. Upon this special deity he would always depend for help in times of difficulty.

Although some of the rites of the cults were of a more quiet kind, and for the most part highly secret, some forms of cult worship were wild orgies. It was because of their highly immoral and socially dangerous nature that the Senate expelled from Rome certain of the cults.

The mystery cults were very popular among the common people in the time of Augustus, and replaced the old Roman nature gods in which the people had to a large extent lost faith. The cult of Mithras, often called the Persian cult, which had been imported from the East by the soldiers of Pompey some seventy years before Christ, gained great vogue in the Roman army, and by the 3d century after Christ, it was no mean competitor of Christianity.

Emperor Worship.—The religion of the Greeks was basically a worship of the great and the beautiful. Such universal concepts as love, beauty, and fertility, or concrete elements such as earth, sea, and sun, were personified and deified. Heroes and heroines who were reputed to have wielded great influence in the distant past were raised to the position of gods. These numerous deified personalities were thought to have joined the even more ancient gods in their home on Mt. Olympus. There they lived, loved, and

fought, while supervising affairs in the world, though always isolated by their divinity from any deep personal concern for humanity.

There were, however, three avenues by which the gods were supposed to concern themselves with humankind. It was thought that if a man became very successful he would arouse the jealousy of the gods, and that they would proceed to destroy his wealth, possibly even the man himself. It behooved him, therefore, to conceal his success lest the gods punish him. It was supposed, also, that from time to time the gods became intimate with women—or the goddesses with men—and new generations of remarkable men—or gods—resulted. Thus Heracles, known to Romans as Hercules, was supposed to be the son of Zeus, the Roman Jupiter, by the woman Alcmene. Aphrodite, the Roman Venus, was supposedly a daughter of Zeus by the woman Dione. A third evidence of divine interposition was thought to be seen when anyone achieved striking success in an enterprise or undertaking. Thus it seemed evident to the peoples of the East whom Alexander the Great conquered that he was possessed of a divine spirit, or genius, as the Latins called it, and the Greeks themselves eventually came to share that opinion.

In popular opinion the same was true of Julius Caesar, and when Octavian, his nephew and heir, proved extraordinarily successful in his administration of Rome's extensive territories, he soon became an object of worship, particularly in certain localities of Asia Minor. Even the morose Tiberius, the insane Caligula, and the timid Claudius were accounted divine. Though the despicable Nero laughed at his own supposed divinity, he was nevertheless proud of it with an adolescent pride. Vespasian, who lifted Rome part way out of the pit into which Nero had led it, is supposed to have said as he died, "I am about to become a god." Generally speaking, the cult of living emperors was confined to certain provincial areas and was not encouraged at Rome, where emperors were deified only after their death. Caligula and Domitian, however, actively sought the worship of their subjects.

It is little wonder that when the Romans heard the Jews speak of their Messiah—Deliverer—and the Christians of Jesus Christ as God, and of their expectation of His triumphant return as King, they concluded that both beings must be rivals of their emperor, and both religious groups thus enemies of the empire. This accounts, in part, for the resoluteness with which the Romans crushed repeated Jewish revolts and for their increasing determination to obliterate Christianity. The Christian apologist Tertullian, writing about the year A.D. 225, explained, "'You do not worship the gods,' you say; 'and you do not offer sacrifice for the emperors.' Well, we do not offer sacrifice for others, for the same reason that we do not for ourselves,—namely, that your gods are not at all the objects of our worship. So we are accused of sacrilege and treason. This is the chief ground of charge against us—nay, it is the sum-total of our offending" (*Apology,* 10; *ANF*, vol. 3, p. 26).

By the time Augustus had become well established in his principate, and about the time our Lord was born in Bethlehem, an intense expectancy arose in Rome that out of the despair of the preceding period of civil war there would come a golden age. It was hoped that Augustus might have a son who would usher in that bright era of permanent peace and security. To this messianic hope various contemporary writers bear witness (see Vol. V,pp. 61, 62).

IX. Christianity and the Empire

Christianity and the State.—It has been pointed out that the Romans were tolerant of religions. As they enlarged their territorial conquests and acquisitions, they accepted the gods of their new subjects and greatly added to the number they already possessed. A religion was declared illegal only when it was hurtful to public morals, as in the case of the cults of Bacchus and Isis, or when the religion was understood to be a party to civil revolt, as with druidism in Gaul.

Even with the determined and religiously tenacious Jew, the Romans sought to be broad-minded. But they could not understand why he objected and rioted when they brought their own gods into Palestine. They could not understand how the Jews could worship a God who could not be visualized; that seemed to them a kind of atheism. They sneered at the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath, which they said was simply an opportunity for Jewish idleness. They resented the fact that the Jews refused to worship either Roma, the divine spirit of the Roman people, or the genius of the emperors. They knew there was a connection between certain tenets of the Jewish faith, especially their Messianism, and their civic restlessness under Roman rule. It was such considerations, added to their rebellious spirit and provocative acts, that eventually brought on wars that almost destroyed the Jewish race.

But in the earlier years of contact the conquerors sought to be understanding. When the Jewish leaders consented to pray for the emperor and his peoples, the Romans accepted the concession. They watched the Jews, and suppressed their sporadic revolts with an iron hand, but tolerated their religion.

Had the Jews accepted Christianity as one more Jewish sect, like Essenism or Pharisaism, the case of Christianity would have been different—in more ways than one, indeed. The Christian Jews started out with the concept that it was a religious reforming movement within Judaism, a saving leaven which would eventually permeate and redeem the whole Jewish race. But the majority of Jews did not share this view. Thousands of them embraced the Christian faith, but the race officially rejected it, for reasons which the Gospels and Acts make clear.

Hence Christianity could not stand before the world as a Jewish sect. It thus had no national roots. In the eyes of Rome, it was an upstart cult, and had no legal standing until the early 4th century. Hence Nero, when he needed a scapegoat for the burning of Rome, found a convenient victim in Christianity. A century later it was easy to blame the illegal sect for the disasters of earthquake and pestilence under which the Roman people suffered during the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, and these otherwise noble and beneficent emperors persecuted the Christians severely.

Roman Citizenship and Christianity.—It is not clearly understood how Roman citizenship extended beyond the confines of privileged classes in the capital city. Under Augustus Caesar it was gradually granted to the provinces, but even then it was restricted to individuals.

Tarsus, the home city of the apostle Paul, is an illustration of how Roman citizenship was probably acquired. For centuries before the apostle's birth it had been an important political and commercial center. There had been the usual mixing of population seen in any commercial city. Besides the original inhabitants, there were Greeks who had settled both before and during the time of Alexander the Great. After many vicissitudes and some decline, the city was reconstituted under Antiochus Epiphanes, and more Greeks, with others from less favored Greek-speaking lands, came into Cilicia and its capital city.

Doubtless there had been Jews in Tarsus for many generations, but many more entered under Antiochus Epiphanes. Perhaps many of these were conservatives, whom Antiochus was only too glad to move out of Palestine, which he was seeking to Hellenize. The result was a large Jewish colony in Tarsus, comparable to, though not as large as, the settlement in Alexandria, at the southern corner of the Mediterranean. As in Alexandria, there were then in Tarsus two main elements in the population—Gentiles and Jews—and the two were more or less uncongenial. See The Diaspora.

Through the years Tarsus had developed into a self-governing metropolis, and the Greeks and Jews were probably full citizens of the community. As in Alexandria, the Jews of Tarsus probably exerted their citizenship as a "tribe," a governmental device commonly used in both Greek and Roman cities. It has been suggested that the "kinsmen" Paul mentions in Rom. 16:7, 11, 21 were fellow tribesmen in the political sense, and came from Tarsus.

But this Tarsian citizenship did not mean Roman citizenship. During the Julian wars of 55–31 B.C. the Tarsians were favorable to the Caesarian party, and this became useful to both Julius Caesar and Octavian. If Roman citizenship had not been extended to favored ones in Tarsus during the era of Pompey or before, it probably was used as a reward for Julian loyalty during these years of bitter partisan struggle. This may have been the time when the family of Paul received Roman citizenship. This would be full citizenship, meaningful in any part of Rome's far-reaching jurisdiction. It is not known what proof of his status a citizen would have to carry when traveling, for credentials of this sort have not yet been identified.

When Paul's family moved to Tarsus it is impossible to know. There is no reason to credit the tradition which Jerome repeats that the family was transported there from Gischala in Palestine during the early Roman wars in Palestine. The fact that Paul was a Pharisee indicates either that the family transferred from Palestine late, after the sect had been formed there, about 150 B.C., or that, having previously settled in Tarsus, it had accepted the tenets of the sect as they spread among the dispersed Jews, the Diaspora.

In any case, Paul, a citizen of Tarsus, and probably belonging to one of the political "tribes," was also a Roman citizen. This position he had from his father, and not by purchase (Acts 22:28). He asserted it more than once, and made telling use of its privileges (chs. 16:37; 22:25–28; 25:8–12, 21–25; 26:30–32; 28:17–20).

Roman citizenship gave to its holder a measure of protection from oppression at the hand of magistrates or police and a firmer claim upon ultimate justice. A citizen under a capital charge could not legally be flogged, or worse, without fair trial, and had the right of appeal to the emperor as the chief magistrate of the Roman state. That this did not always save a man from the carelessness, the indifference, or the tyranny of local authorities is shown by the fact that Paul was flogged without full trial at Philippi (Acts 16:19–24), and at least twice more on other occasions (2 Cor. 11:25). That Roman citizenship could bring a man better hope for justice is witnessed by the care with which the magistrates of Philippi tried to atone for their previous mistake in dealing with Paul (Acts 16:35–39), and by the fact that Paul's appeal to Caesar kept him out of the hands of the fanatical and vengeful Jews in Jerusalem (ch. 25:8–12).

There is evidence to suggest that the time within which an appeal must be met by formal accusation, before it should be quashed, was probably two years. Since, upon the arrival of Paul in Rome as a prisoner, the Roman Jews were found to have no charges

against him (Acts 28:17–22), and apparently no accusations came through from Palestine, his case was evidently canceled by default, and he was freed.

Christianity and the Fall of Rome.—In view of the debilitating weaknesses which existed in the Roman constitution and in Roman public and private life, it seems strange that so skilled a historian as Edward Gibbon should have based his great history on a completely false premise. One evening in October, 1764, this author of the famous and still factually reliable *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was sitting amid the ruins of ancient Rome. As the wreckage of that city stood out before him, Gibbon fell to pondering the cause of the collapse of what had once been a glorious empire, as many a historian has pondered before and since. Well versed as he was in the history of the Church of Rome through the Middle Ages, and in its claim to be Rome's successor and heir, Gibbon thought he identified the basic cause of Rome's downfall: it was Christianity, said he.

Small wonder that evangelical Christians have rejected Gibbon's theory. The truth is that Rome was already in a dangerous condition, lacking only a strong external foe to administer its death stroke, when Julius Caesar rescued it. Again and again Rome was saved, barely in time, by an Augustus Caesar, a Vespasian, a Trajan, a Marcus Aurelius, and a Constantine. Christianity, the saving salt of Rome, gave the empire a prolonged lease of life. Much of the essence of pagan Rome—of its religion, law, and government—was then perpetuated in the Church of Rome, whose historians consider it to be, in certain significant respects, the legitimate successor of the defunct Roman Empire.

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