

CHAPTER FOUR: ROME AND THE BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

The earliest records of Rome are a mixture of legend and truth. Because of this, some historians have discounted value for understanding what happened, but as time has gone by, more and more evidence has been found the myths had more to them than was originally thought. Certainly many of the later Romans believed them to be true, and their moral substance was an important foundation for much of Roman thought.

Some Roman Traditions

The earliest Roman myth describes the founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, being placed in a tiny boat, rescued by a wolf and finally raised by a shepherd. Romulus settled in an all male village, whose occupants decided to kidnap some neighboring women (Sabine women) to make things more interesting.

Some have pointed out that the above sounds suspiciously similar to the Bible account of Moses and the bulrushes and the Judges account of getting wives for the Benjamites.¹ However, we know that the Bible could not have been copied from these myths, since the founding of Rome was hundreds of years after the biblical events. If there was any copying, it was the myths being adapted from the biblical account!

Another early Roman myth, a favorite of the American founding fathers, described the Roman army being trapped in the hills by neighboring tribes. The senate, in an emergency meeting, voted dictatorial powers to Cincinnatus, a farmer. The latter rounded up some of the older men and young boys, and rescued the Roman army. When he returned to town, the people gave him a hero's welcome, but sixteen days after becoming dictator he went back to farming.

Such thinking was very much a part of our country's founders. Our government is one of

the very few where a president goes back to “farming” after four (or eight) years of leadership. In nearly every other country of the world, dictators take control for life, usually through revolution or assassination. We have a great legacy, a very rare form of government, which we take for granted.

Actually we see a trend in the opposite direction taking place today. People expect their president to perform almost super-human tasks. The story is told that a number of years ago several residents of New Guinea raised \$89,000 to buy the President Lyndon Johnson. They thought he could wave a magic wand and provide them with the miracle of a Great Society like America. I am afraid we expect too much of our leaders too. We live in a new “Age of faith;” only our faith is in big government and powerful leaders. When the programs fail (which they often do) and leaders are less than exemplary, we feel betrayed. Perhaps we have given them too much power and money, and then expect too much from them.

Roman and Hebrew Politics

There are a number of similarities between Old Testament politics and that of the Romans. Both held to the concept of a higher law. While the United States began with the same concept, Supreme Court Justice Holmes changed that dramatically shortly after 1900. Holmes felt that all ideas were relative and the majority opinion was the only truth. He even went so far as to say “If my country wants to go to hell, I’m here to help it.”ⁱⁱ Little wonder that we see a breakdown of basic morality as well as law and order--our foundation is gone.

Roman and Hebrew law had some important differences as well. The foundation in the Old Testament was the law of Moses, which had definite political implications. One was that the Israelites were a select nation, a model for the rest of the world when they obeyed God’s law.

Unfortunately, like many Christians today, they too often did not combine their religion and real thought. Under the Judges they had freedom limited only by the Law of God, but they suffered needlessly because they lacked a real understanding of God's principles. When they asked for a king, God gave them a lecture on the evils of a centralized government (I Sam. 8). They persisted and God gave them what they asked for: heavy taxation, a nation spent into bankruptcy under Solomon, and eventual decline and collapse thereafter.

While the Romans didn't have a God-given religion, they did have a Republic that lasted well over 400 years. That is quite an achievement in history, one that Christians can learn from. We need to be eclectic in our study of history, taking what is workable and consistent with the Bible, and discarding the rest. Let's not render all things political to Caesar and let God retire to less important matters.

The Roman government had a senate and two consuls who maintained a balance of power. From this idea our country developed a system of "checks and balances" where the president, the legislature and the courts balance one another. In times of great peril the senate could elect a temporary dictator (as they did with Cincinnatus), similar to the power we give our president during war.

The Growth of Rome

The Romans fought a number of battles to gain control of the entire "boot" (Italy is the shape of a boot); in a sense they considered it their "manifest destiny" to control the peninsula. After they accomplished this task, they became isolationist much as the United States did when we held all of the land "from sea to sea."

What ended their brief isolationism was a little island just south of "the boot"--Sicily.

That island invited Carthage, an enemy of Rome, to set up forces and help them overcome their problems. The parallel to the Russian influence in Cuba is obvious, and we must not forget that we almost went to war with Russia over Cuba during the early 1960's.

Instead of fighting over the island, the Romans would have been far wiser to make Sicily a buffer state, a neutral territory dominated by neither Rome or Carthage. Perhaps the same could be said for Cuba, as well as Taiwan and South Korea (the Chinese and Russians consider these an invasion of their territory just as we consider Soviet occupation of Cuba an invasion of our territory). A buffer state has worked a number of times historically, and could do so again, if the superpowers would both exercise restraint.

In a later war, Carthage came against Rome under the leadership of Hannibal, who marched his elephants from Africa through Spain, then Switzerland, and finally down the Italian peninsula. While only half of his men survived the trip, Hannibal's elephants were an effective battle tool, not unlike a modern tank. The Romans certainly had no anti-elephant defenses.

Fabius, the leader of the Romans, therefore adopted a "do-nothing" strategy; instead of battles, they resorted to the guerrilla tactics of hitting and running. This cautious approach of avoiding open conflict worked for awhile, and while Hannibal was never defeated, he could not take Rome.ⁱⁱⁱ Guerrilla tactics are the mainstay of most wars in our world today, an approach pioneered by Fabius.

Too often the Romans have been viewed as power hungry conquerors, but this is not entirely accurate. They tried to be isolationist, but their neighbors kept bothering them. When the Greeks were overcome by miserable dictators, Rome intervened to liberate their neighbors, then went home, but the uprisings continued. Finally Rome got tired of all the fussing and made

Greece a province--they did not really want Greece, but they did want law and order.

The power of Rome was in some ways like the power wielded by the United States after World War II. When Russia invaded Hungary, Poland, East German, and later Czechoslovakia, we could have told them to go their own way and not interfere. Unfortunately we just hummed and hawed, looking the other way as we allowed the Soviets to become a superpower. Does the Bible say something about sins of omission?

The Maccabees

One of Rome's enemies took on the defenseless Jews in Jerusalem. Antiochus sacrificed a pig on the altar, an extreme sacrilege to the Jews. Actually some of the Jews cooperated with Antiochus until he got out of hand, requiring heathen worship in nearby villages. In response, a priest and his sons revolted, revolutionaries who were later nicknamed the "Maccabees" (literally "the hammer"). Somehow the Maccabees survived despite incredible odds, and after a number of crushing defeats finally gained their freedom in 142 B.C. The Jews celebrate the reestablishment of the sacrifices under the Maccabees at Hanukkah.

As a result the Romans and Hebrews had a relatively good relationship with one another. The Jews were greatly influenced by the Greek-Roman culture even before this time, and the Greeks also took an interest in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). Traditionalists didn't care for their Jewish young people following the new dress code of Romans and Greeks, feeling it was not modest enough. However, praise for the Romans can be found in the apocryphal books of this era (see I Macc. 8:1-21, 12-16).

Julius and Augustus

The Roman character degenerated in the second and first centuries B.C.; while the

common citizen was still a relatively moral heathen, leaders became known for their bribery and corruption. Political turmoil increased, with rioting and killing the norm. In the midst of the problems, Julius became a “temporary dictator;” a totalitarian leader who made a number of very positive reforms and minimized the graft and corruption so common in politics. He also encouraged more government jobs.

Julius was succeeded by his grand-nephew, Augustus, who diplomatically used the terminology of the republic even though his government was clearly authoritarian. This use of “Newspeak” was the predecessor of today’s variety: we talk of a “new morality” that is anything but moral, and communists call their countries “democratic” (leaders are elected, the only hitch is that they run unopposed).

Augustus is a good example of “peace at any price.” He restored peace, stability and prosperity, but the price was a powerful centralized government led by a lifelong dictator. This short run solution began a long term decline of the empire. Bigger and more powerful governments are rarely a lasting solution, while problems tend to multiply.

By the time of Julius, the kingdom of the Maccabees was in chaos, so he allowed Herod the Great to rule over Jerusalem. Herod never got along with his Jewish subjects although he married into the Maccabean line to gain favor. He loved his Jewish wife as much as anyone in his lifetime, but because of jealousy in his family he had her killed. Afterward he realized his great loss, and was haunted by her image constantly. He called for her over and over, often bursting into tears.

His grief, and occasional mental illness, turned him into a merciless tyrant who lashed out at anyone suspected of treason. The biblical account of Herod killing all of the babies in

Bethlehem was entirely in character--he even executed his own children near the time of his death.

Nationalism and the Persecution of Christians

With the destruction of the Jewish temple in the year 70, and the attendant end of the Jewish commonwealth, Christianity became clearly distinct from Judaism. A few Jewish Christians remained, but they were rare.

By this time the Romans had become very nationalistic; patriotism became so extreme that it was essentially a religion. There is a major difference between proper patriotism ("rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's") and nationalism, where one's country becomes one's god. Rome's nationalism involved emperor worship and corresponding persecution of Christians.

We must never forget that nationalism is not the Christian's goal. Today we have a phenomenon called "civil religion" in which references to God are used by national leaders, often for the purpose of appealing to religious feelings of citizens. This civil religion has no doctrine of sin or need of repentance, but instead links works with religious connotations to policies and leader's images.^{iv} The early Christians were clearly not called to a "civil" religion, but to a revolutionary faith that often cost them their lives.

While Nero is often credited with the first Roman persecution of Christians, we need to look more carefully at the historical record. When Paul appealed to Caesar, that Caesar was undoubtedly Nero (this may explain why he was imprisoned so long in Rome). Persecution under Nero was probably not religious in nature, Christians were only a scapegoat.^v The irony is that Paul was probably killed by the Caesar he appealed to.

The Romans were generally fair in their governance and quite tolerant of religion. The problem with Christians was that they were considered unpatriotic; they failed to do their duty by worshiping the emperor and serving in the legions (the army). The Christian pacifism really bothered the Roman militarists, who considered the nonconformists to be subversive.

To be fair, many of the Roman rulers misunderstood the true nature of Christianity and persecuted in ignorance. The Romans feared any non-governmental organization,^{vi} thus the Christian groups were automatically suspect. Rumors of ritual cannibalism among Christians (drinking blood and eating a body) did not help their reputation, although they were only taking communion.

Parallels Between the United States and Rome

While history does not, strictly speaking, repeat itself, there are a number of interesting parallels between the Roman Empire and today's America. Howard Snyder^{vii} and other writers have pointed out that many characteristics are similar, thus making many applications from the New Testament era particularly relevant for today. These similarities include:

1. Social ferment and an emphasis upon mystical religion
2. An overwhelming desire for pleasure and luxury
3. One predominant language and culture, primarily urban
4. An emphasis upon the Holy Spirit in the church
5. Writers speaking about a decline in morality
6. An emphasis upon the second coming in the churches
7. Escapism and violence in entertainment
8. Legalism in certain churches

9. Many laws and increasing control by government

Big Government in Rome

The parallel between Rome and the U.S. is particularly striking when one looks at economic progress. Nero devalued the currency by adding a cheap base metal to the coinage of his day, much as the United States introduced “sandwich currency” a couple of decades ago. Myth has it that he also started a hot new slum clearance program while he fiddled around in Rome. We’re still clearing out slums today, and our legislators continue to fiddle around!

Nero’s successors, the Flavian emperors, went even further in building a bigger government. State funded education was introduced, accompanied by more taxes and greater control of everyday life. With the increased power of government officials came greater cruelty. As Lord Acton once said, “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” and this era is one of many examples in history. Certainly everyone was not happy, as assassination attempts dramatically increased. Even leaders were unhappy; seven out of ten emperors committed suicide.

Diocletian, who came to power in the year 285, issued his famous Edict of Prices which suggested that land owners use magic to keep rain from falling. Why would he want such a thing? He wanted to keep farm produce scarce and thus expensive. This idea must have seemed absurd to the poor and starving of his day, but the idea is still very alive today. The New Deal, a program which supposedly helped us get out of the depression, included much the same idea-- paying farmers to plow under crops or paying them not to plant in the first place. This policy is currently a part of the government farm program in our country, in spite of the starving millions in our world.

Diocletian also distributed food for free or at low cost, while imposing wage and price controls.^{viii} His left wing economics did not work too well--he did bring order out of the chaos, but at the expense of ruining what little Roman prosperity remained. The wage and price controls were used because of the high inflation, which in turn had been caused by debasing the currency. The controls did not stop inflation, but it did bring mountains of red tape and bureaucracy, and of course ever higher taxes.^{ix} All of these helped speed along the eventual collapse of Rome.

Christianity Becomes the State Religion

Diocletian led a widespread persecution of the church. The standard account of the story is that Diocletian tried to destroy every Bible, every place of worship, and every single Christian, although some suspect this is a bit exaggerated. He certainly did not succeed in his attempt to erase Christianity--seven years later Christianity became lawful in 311 and by the 380's was proclaimed the state religion! How could that be? Perhaps the only explanation is that "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church;" people are attracted to a religion that is worth dying for.

Christianity grew rapidly and became the state religion under Emperor Constantine. While some church historians say he was a great "man of destiny,"^x other historians portray him as no great saint, but rather a clever and lucky politician. He was clearly a great compromiser, perhaps saw Christianity as the coming trend, and thus saw it as politically expedient to tolerate it.

Constantine was hardly what we would call an evangelical--sun worship was attributed to his rise to power (whether he actually worshiped the sun is unknown). Through his influence

people moved from solar monotheism to Christian monotheism, or combined the two.

Examples of his compromises include celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25, which had formerly been the day when people celebrated the birth of the sun god. To add to the confusion, Christians met on Sunday, the holy day of the sun, and often turned to the East when they prayed, as the sun worshipers did. The adoration of Mary was substituted for worshipping the sun goddess, and engravings of the sun ("obelisks") were included in the architecture.

There were reasons other than compromise for the increased popularity of Christianity, of course. It may have just been fashionable, a "swing of the pendulum." Or the possibility of upward mobility could have had an influence; even a slave could become a bishop. Political sanction undoubtedly helped. But it is also likely that the commitment of Christians was a factor--they were convinced they were right and did their best to convince others.

How Did Christians Influence Rome?

While not everyone who claimed to be a Christian was sincere; hypocrites abounded then as they do today, Christians did succeed in making a number of significant changes for the better. For example, they stopped the common practice of infanticide--the killing of unwanted babies by allowing them to starve to death. We again have infanticide, this time by starving deformed babies, an increasingly common practice. Abortion is a more polite form of infanticide--the mother never sees the baby she is killing for her own convenience.

Christians were also responsible for weakening slavery to the point it nearly disappeared. While Paul has been criticized for not being stronger in his condemnation of slavery in Philemon, the early Christians clearly understood him to be undermining the institution of slavery. We must also remember slavery in the Roman Empire was not racially based--slavery of

the last century was quite different from Roman slavery.

Christians also stopped killing for fun. The gladiatorial games were suppressed, and with it the mindless murdering for amusement. Today we repeatedly see killing a key solution for problems on television and the big screen.

Unfortunately, Christians failed to correct the economic problems of the empire. For example, they could have ended compulsory guild membership (much like our unions today), which helped to destroy the economy. The faithful could have stopped the spiraling inflation by insisting that the government live within its means. Today we have instant inflation because of our reliance upon paper money--we can do even more damage than the disastrous Roman economic policies could do.

Christians could also have insisted upon proper separation of church and state. The king should not have ruled the church, as Constantine did. Yes, they (and we) needed Christian rulers implementing Christian principles, but the government should not control churches (and churches should not run government, as the popes later did). The Old Testament principle is clear, the prophet (or priest) balances and checks the power of the king; the king should not sacrifice and the prophet must not rule. We no longer have Nathans that can confront David, or Samuels that will confront their Sauls. Our modern version of church/state separation is to muzzle the church and glorify the state--a far cry from the Bible!

Chapter Four

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- i. William Smith, ed., *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 292.
 - ii. Brendan Brown, ed., *The Natural Law Reader*, pp. 117-123.

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- iii. Polybius, in Lodge, ed., *World's Classics*, vol. I, pp. 186-189.
 - iv. Richard Stellway, in Stephen Grunlan & Milton Reimer, eds., *Christian Perspectives on Sociology*.
 - v. Turtullian, as quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The Growing Day*, pp. 34-35.
 - vi. Trajan, in Charles Eliot, ed., *Harvard Classics*, pp. 396-397.
 - vii. Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins*, pp. 27-33.
 - viii. Arleigh Hess, et al, *Outside Readings in Economics*, 2nd ed, pp. 322-335.
 - ix. F. Roy Willis, *Western Civilization*, vol. 1, p. 139.
 - x. John Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, pp. 14-15.