

The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament was a world under the domination of the Roman Empire. After the death of Alexander the Great, his kingdom was divided among his four generals. One of them, Ptolemy and his successors ruled Judea for many years, and throughout Palestine they built many Hellenistic cities. Jeffers writes, "Anyone doing business with them had to learn their language, Greek, and could not help but be influenced by their culture." (pg. 15). When Rome conquered the Mediterranean area, Romans incorporated the conquered peoples into their society. Judea became part of the Roman Empire either as a client state or as a province. Romans may have defeated the Greek armies but not their culture.

The administration of the Roman empire was greatly influenced by Greek ideas. There was a democratic system of Government whereby the citizens selected the officials; however, the power really lied with the Senate. The Senate comprised the wealthy and powerful men of the state who inherited their positions from their fathers. Rome was driven by the patron client system which allowed the wealthy to exercise power as patrons over their clients. The clients who were less fortunate Roman citizens worked for their patrons. Clients would show respect and sing the praises of their patrons, and in return, the patrons would provide legal protection and financial assistance.

Rome comprised many cultures and over a period of time, recognized that it was more effective to govern with a small number of leaders who could hold power only if the people allowed them to do so. Rome would therefore convince the aristocrats of those conquered to adopt their system of government to which they agreed partly out of greed and partly out of a sense of self preservation. This system offered rewards to those individuals who supported it.

Occupations in the first century were very different from those of the modern world. Professions such as doctors and artists were not held in high esteem, and were treated with contempt since those who typically performed those jobs were slaves. These professions were done by skilled slaves who were part of a private group that did not qualify to work for the state. About ninety percent of the workers in the Empire were employed on farms, some were small private farms which were tended by family members and slaves, this depended on the size of the farm.

Wealthy landowners would lease plots of their farmland to tenant farmers, who would grow vegetables and cereals, very profitably.

Herding was an important part of food production which involved the caring of sheep, goats, or cattle. Sometimes the owners would take care of their own livestock, or it was left up to their sons or their slaves to do so. Shepherds were not received kindly and were looked down upon because they were thought to be dirty and smelly since most of their time was spent in the fields with the animals.

Like the modern world, trade was important. Some with wealth were willing to take great risks to invest and make large profits; however, not everyone with wealth was willing to do so.

According to Jeffers, Roman aristocrats considered trade as dirty business in which no self-respecting member of the upper class would be involved. Some of the elite made their money through farming but many aristocrats, enticed by the profit in trading, participated directly or had their slaves or freed agents trade for them.

There were professional bankers and wealthy Roman families who practiced moneylending.

Roman laws protected the moneylenders by giving them the right to sell into slavery, those who borrowed and could not or would not repay their debt, or hold them in temporary debt bondage.

People sought various ways to protect their income. Some buried their wealth in safe areas of

their homes, some took their wealth to the temples believing that the gods would protect. Later, some Christians would sell themselves into slavery to raise money for the churches in Rome.

In the Greco-Roman world, life was centered around the city. Cities were usually located along the highways, near river crossings, and near ports for easy access to transportation. The most important cities were enclosed by massive walls with watch towers at the corners and at both sides of the city gate. The city gate was large enough to allow large animals and large carts to go through. For security reasons, the gates of the city were closed at night. Jeffers writes, “By contrast, a Greek or Roman city was built on a formal grid of streets crossing at right angles. A traveler knew that the street from the city gate bisected the city, extending straight to the agora or forum and typically crossing the city to a gate at the far side. The streets, at least the main boulevards, usually were wider than in ancient Near Eastern cities as well.” (pg. 51).

The city of Rome was most beautiful with a display of an accumulation of wealth unseen in Western societies up to that time. Hundreds of private mansions dotted the hills of the city, marble facades graced the massive public buildings of its forum and miles of aqueducts brought spring water to public fountains and homes of the wealthy Romans.

Businesses operated throughout the city where the basic necessities would be purchased.

Between noon and two o'clock, shopkeepers closed their businesses for lunch and to escape the heat of the day. Businesses remained open until sundown, and shopkeepers tried to be home before dark. Since there was no streetlight, one risks the chance of being robbed. Only the wealthy ventured outside at night because they had their own bodyguards.

In Greek cities, members of the upper class were expected to assist in the building and in the upkeep of properties owned by the city. In Roman cities, the law required those who had been elected as magistrates, were to pay certain fees and contribute to the expenses of public games.

Religion was at the center of life in the Greco-Roman world. The Romans believed in many gods and tolerated the gods of others even though they considered these gods distasteful. Ancient religion originated with the farmers who needed to be assured that they would have a successful harvest, and believed that certain gods could provide that assurance. The original purpose of religion was a means of obtaining the cooperation and favors of the gods. Rules were established to give the proper instructions for the performance of rituals such as how to sacrifice an animal or to pronounce blessings. It was important that the rituals were performed correctly to obtain help from the gods. Jeffers writes, "In essence prayer was an attempt to coerce the forces of nature. The prayer began with an invocation, a reminder of past benefits or a reference to the god's power to confer benefits. It then stated the request, always accompanied by a promise to reward the god in return. Such promises ranged from a simple sacrifice or commemorative plaque in the building of a temple. Ritual dances and animal sacrifices often accompanied the traditional prayers." (pg.90).

The characteristic form of worship, whether public or private, was the sacrifice. After the animal was slaughtered and its internal organs were carefully removed, to make sure that it was an acceptable offering, certain ineligible parts were burned at the altar. Some of the eligible parts were cooked and eaten by the priests and the remainder was sent to the local meat shops to be sold.

The Greek and Roman gods were worshiped as defenders of the empire and cities. During the first century the cult of the emperor was established. Emperor worship was a means of showing

the loyalty of the provincials to the emperor. The people of the empire who worshiped many gods, welcomed the cult of the emperor. Devotion to the emperor was demonstrated by the sacrificing of a bull, and the offering of incense in public by priests or magistrates. The Jews and Christians had serious problems with emperor worship. The Jews could not worship the emperor without violating the requirements of their religion which the Greeks and Romans did not understand but they tolerated. Fortunately, the Jews were exempt from emperor worship, and Christians benefited from the Jewish exemption because Christianity appeared to be a sect of Judaism. However, Christianity was never granted its own exemption from emperor worship.

The system of government established in the empire was not designed for the benefit of its provinces, but for the support of its leaders in Rome, whether that meant collecting the maximum amount of taxes possible or protecting the empire by suppressing all threats from within and without. The Roman government was more concerned about the city of Rome than the provinces. Members of the government appointed the governor, who may have been a proconsul, propraetor, legate or a prefect. These were the ruling authorities in the provinces who were bound by law to honor specific arrangements for tax exemption and other entitlements. If these prerogatives were not met, the provinces could appeal directly to the senate or to the emperor.

According to Jeffers, "In A.D. 6, Rome established in Judea a new kind of province. Judea became a second- rank imperial province whose government was a prefect of equestrian rank rather than a legate of the higher, senatorial rank. This action shows that, while Judea was not of the strategic importance of a Syria or an Egypt, Rome considered it troublesome enough to require direct control.

The administrative center of the province of Judea was in Caesarea, but troops were stationed in Jerusalem in a fortress next to the temple. This was because the temple was a place where Jews

could assemble to express their national sentiments. This made Jerusalem an unusual and dangerous place. The Sanhedrin council in Jerusalem functioned as a leading religious body in the province. It was composed of members of the leading families of the province. The high priest was the most important political person after the governor. This allowed the Roman governor to exercise control over the appointment of the high priest. Rome exercised a great amount of control over the office of high priest, and held the garments of the high priest which were released only four times per year during religious festivals. However, Jews were allowed to have control over most of their religious matters. They were allowed to send to the Jerusalem Temple the annual tax of half a shekel and they were exempt from participating in emperor worship.

Of the fourteen Roman governors who ruled during 6 CE and 66 CE, only three were mentioned. Pontius Pilate, who became famous for ordering the execution of Jesus even though he found no fault in him, and Marcus Antonius Felix, and Porcius Festus who are mentioned in Acts on account of the arrest of Paul. Pilate had made many enemies in Judea. He offended the Jews when he sought to erect a golden shield inscribed with his name and that of the emperor on the walls of Herod's palace in Jerusalem. He offended the Samaritans when a group of Samaritans followed a prophet who claimed to be the messiah to Mount Gerizim in Samaria. Pilate was troubled and sent soldiers to break up the group in which many people died. The incident was reported, and Pilate was ordered to report to Rome to defend his actions. However, before Pilate arrived in Rome the emperor died, and Pilate was not allowed to return to Judea.

One reason for having a Roman legion in Jerusalem was to quell whatever revolts the Jews might start. Jews revolted in the sixties and again in the thirties. This is because of their beliefs that God would fight for them and miraculously deliver them from foreign domination.

According to Jeffers, “Under the procurator Gessius Flours in A.D 66, a dispute between Greeks and Jews in Caesarea led to an unsympathetic show of force by the Romans. Zealots responded by seizing the fortress at Masada and massacring its Roman garrison. The priestly establishment joined the revolt when it suspended sacrifices on behalf of the emperor. This amounted to a declaration of war against the empire. In response, Jews were massacred in many cities (Josephus Jewish War 2.456-458, 477-80,559-61).” (pg. 139). After A.D, the Romans improved their administration of the province of Judea and kept a full legion of professional soldiers stationed in Jerusalem. The Jews continued to pay temple tax; however, the tax was paid to the Romans who used it for the up keeping of the temple of Jupiter which was erected in Jerusalem. An empire as large as the Roman empire required a constant flow of sufficient income to function effectively. Rome had gained great wealth from conquests in the previous centuries, but with limited military conquest in the present period, there was little income coming into the treasury. Rome therefore depended on income from its provinces to maintain its economy. In the New Testament period, Rome collected about 200 hundred million denarii, annually. All public services in the city of Rome were paid from the public treasury, additionally, all administrative expenses of the provinces run by the Roman senate, were paid from the treasury coffers.. The emperor, out of his own personal treasury, paid the expenses of the imperial provinces, those provinces that were under his direct control. He paid the expenses of the governors in the imperial provinces and the salaries of all soldiers in the empire.

Money to support these groups were collected from the noncitizens of the empire. There were two types of tax; a property tax was imposed on those possessing land, houses, slaves, and ships within each province, and a poll tax which was paid by men ages fourteen to sixty-five, and

women ages twelve to sixty-five. This tax was mentioned in the gospel as being one denarius per year. (Matt.22:15-22; Luke 20:21-26).

In Roman law, crimes committed against persons, society, and the government were considered major. The laws were mainly for the upper class and government officials. Crimes that were committed by the common person were judged by a magistrate, who on the advice of a council, could determine what was legal, what was illegal, and what was the appropriate punishment to be administered. The provincial governor had many functions to perform, however, he got involved only in cases concerning order and left the local leader of the province to handle smaller matters. In the province of Judea, the high priest and the Sanhedrin council continued to follow and enforce the laws of Moses with the expectation that the Roman authorities would honor their right to do so.

A wide variety of punishments was used in Roman societies ranging from fines, beatings, exiles, and for the most severe crime, execution. Romans did not believe in punishing people with long periods of imprisonment. Non-citizens who were suspected of committing crimes were imprisoned and beaten before their trials. Jeffers writes, "In recounting his sufferings for Christ, Paul says that he was beaten with rods three times (2Cor 11:25). The magistrate of a local colony like Philippi possessed special powers. Each magistrate was allowed two lictors. The lictors carried bundles of rods that symbolized the magistrate's authority but were also used to administer beatings. These magistrates had authority equal to that of a military tribune in the Roman army but could only use that authority in war time." (pg.157).

Life in the military in ancient times was not as glamorous as depicted in the movies today. The early Roman conquests were obtained with an army of nonprofessional unpaid volunteers. The soldiers were peasant farmers who were drafted from among Roman citizenry. They were

responsible for their own food, clothes, and weapons for the year they would serve. Serving in the army was a great privilege and an honor for the free full citizen, and one who served well had the opportunity to be appointed a praetorian guard. These guards served sixteen years instead of twenty years, and they were paid three times the salary of that of a regular legionary. The praetorian guard grew in power over the years and became the central base of the emperor. Emperors were willing to lay out large sums of money and influence on securing and keeping the support of the guard. According to Jeffers, “the phrase en holo to praitorio in Philippians 1:13 most likely refers to ‘the whole praetorian guard’ in Rome. When Paul singles out the praetorian guard among those who had heard why he was in prison, he demonstrates an understanding of the importance of this group.” (pg.173).

Social class in the Roman empire was quite different from that of modern societies, in which wealth, income, education, occupation, and race are indications of social status. Class in Roman society indicated the group into which one was born, and in which one will die with very few exceptions. In Roman society, a small group was at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy, included in this group were: the senatorial, equestrian and decurion orders. These accounted for about one percent of the population and they were involved in leadership in every area of public life. Aristocrats could have held simultaneous positions as business leaders, judges, priests, military officers, and politicians. The senate was composed of the heads of aristocratic families and limited to three hundred members. Equestrians began their careers in the military, and some moved up to hold positions greater and more powerful than the senators. Equestrians were appointed to their positions and the emperor placed greater trust in them since they owed their position to him and not to the senators. The lowest echelon of the upper class was the decurion; this group ruled the cities of Italy, the Roman colonies and other cities that followed the Roman

system of government. Decurions were the local landowners, merchants, and traders whose wealth and status were of varying degrees. Jeffers writes, “The vast majority of the Roman world’s wealth was in the hands of a very small number of persons (see table 8.1). Even more than today, not all the wealthy persons then enjoyed high social status, but virtually everyone in the highest echelons of Roman society were wealthy. The upper classes regularly practiced ‘conspicuous consumption’ as a way to demonstrate their social and political status. Romans considered wealth as an important requirement for a virtuous life, and they believed that only the rich could afford to be honest. The reasoning behind this thinking was that the poor did not have the means to survive, so they were more likely to lie, cheat and steal.

Roman citizenship in the time of Christ was extremely important and valuable. With a population of over fifty million occupants, there were only about five million who had citizenship. Those who held Roman citizenship were entitled to special governmental privileges which included protection from accusations by noncitizens and from a more extreme form of punishment. Roman citizens had the right to vote in elections in Rome, attend public games and performances in the theaters and amphitheaters of the city. Citizens paid less taxes, and those living in the provinces were exempt from the standard tribute taxes which were collected and sent to Rome. The most important tax was the land tax levied on all land outside of Italy, except for Roman colonies and provinces; which were considered Italic land. The lands owned by citizens who resided in those areas were exempt from taxes. Taxes were paid by all citizens on market sales, on the sale of freeing slaves, and on custom duties.

All Roman citizens had the full protection of Roman laws when buying or inheriting property and making legal contracts. Murders were investigated for citizens but not for noncitizens. A citizen could be beaten without first being tried and citizens were not subject to torturous forms

of execution such as crucifixion. Therefore, only citizens enjoyed the benefits of being citizens of the empire.

Slavery became a dominant part of Roman life but was not practiced in the beginning of the empire; even though slavery was practiced in some societies of Near Eastern peoples. Romans in the beginning, killed the captured soldiers who surrendered. However, at some point later, they began to enslave those who were defeated in battle. Any free person could own slaves and almost no one considered the justness of slavery. Over time, Rome became dependent upon slave labor as a major part of its workforce. Large landowners preferred to have slaves rather than free farmers, work on their farms. Slaves were able to work two hundred days yearly while free farmers generally worked only one hundred days.

Slaves came from several different sources: some of whom were defeated in battle, some were captured on land or at sea, others were sold into slavery as infants abandoned by their parents, and even others who sold themselves to pay off a debt or to secure a more stable life. The price of a slave varied depending on their skills and appearance, and generally, slaves in the city of Rome were more expensive than slaves in the provinces.

Slaves performed several different functions, most worked on the farms in Rome. Slaves who worked as domestic servants in the homes of the wealthy were better off than those who worked the fields. They were guaranteed the necessities of life: food, clothes, and shelter. They also worked as spinners, clothes makers, menders, babysitters, kitchen help, and general domestics. Educated slaves in the homes of the wealthy were given special training and could work as clerks, secretaries, entertainers, and midwives. Slaves were at the mercy of their masters and many young boys and girls were sexually exploited by them. A female slave who was not employed as a domestic servant might become an actress, a midwife, or a prostitute. Some slaves

were treated well by their masters, others were treated harshly. In the early empire period, a court of appeal was established to allow abused slaves to force their masters to sell them to a new master. Cases of abuse such as physical abuse and lack of food were serious enough for the courts to intervene.

Slaves were allowed to marry and have families, although members of different classes were not permitted to marry, in some instances it did occur. Jeffers writes, "It would be astonishing that any would wish to marry so far below their class in such a class-bound culture, but at times they did so. Ten percent of slaves in all categories, married free born persons, P.R.C. Weaver estimates that nearly two-thirds of male imperial slaves and freedmen married freeborn women. If a free born woman would marry an imperial slave or freedman because while in some categories her status was higher (wealth, influence, perhaps education or profession), and so she could improve her position and provide an even better future for her children." (pg.228).

Slaves in Roman families were part of the household, they were not members of the family, but sometimes a close relationship developed with their masters who even marry them, they became member of the family.

Often slaves were freed by the time they reached the age of thirty. These freedmen or freedwomen would receive Roman or Greek citizenship. Some were willing to sell themselves into slavery because they knew that enslavement would not be a permanent state, eventual freedom would give them the opportunity to have a better way of life. Slaves of Roman citizens upon their freedom acquired a part of their former masters names which was attached to their names, the names consisted of three parts: the first name, the family name, and the personal name. Coming out of a life of slavery was difficult for some slaves, many were unable to find work to support themselves, however some earned a living by working at a craft or a trade.