

Roman History in New Testament Times

Roman Emperors of New Testament Times

Daniel Institute
BD IV 414 (Biblical Studies)

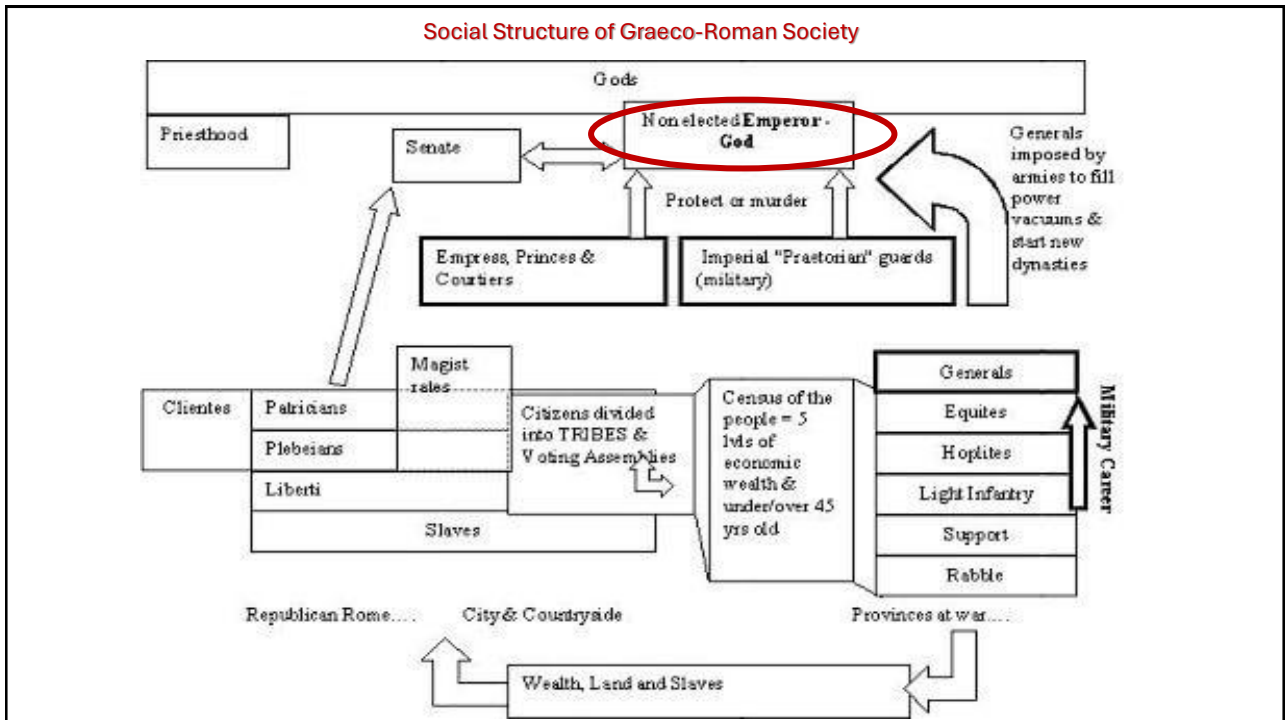
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Learning Outcomes

1. Explain the relevance of the cardinal features of Roman Imperial Ideology for interpreting the New Testament?
2. Evaluate the relevance of the reign of Emperor Augustus to the emergence and spread of Christianity?
3. Assess the impacts of Emperors (a) Tiberius, (b) Claudius, (c) Nero, (d) Vespasian, (e) Titus and (f) Domitian on the history of New Testament Christianity.
4. Evaluate the merits and demerits of the scholarly view that New Testament authors such as Paul used their writings to oppose the Empire.

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The Roles of the Roman Emperor

- **History:** Replaced Republican era. Distinguished from Eastern kings, but incorporated their trappings
- **Imperial Power:** Supreme executive power and ultimate authority as well as control of people's lives.
- **Autocracy:** Expected autocrat, with centralized government, military, and administration of the empire.
- **Imperial Cult:** Key expression of imperial ideology that reshaped Roman religion from the first century
- **Military Leadership:** Commander-in-chief of the powerful Roman army with direct access to loyalty
- **Succession:** Frequently contentious and often gave rise to palace intrigue and power struggles.
- **Bureaucracy:** Complex administrative system for tax collection and official representatives in provinces
- **Building Projects:** Spearheaded extensive building projects as part of cultural Romanization of Empire

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“The Roman emperor was a central feature of the cultural context of the first century and must be taken consistently into account in exegesis of the New Testament.”

[Meggitt, Justin. "Taking the Emperor's Clothes Seriously: The New Testament and the Roman Emperor." *The Quest for Wisdom: Essays in Honour of Philip Budd* (2002): 143-70. Page 143]

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Roman Imperial Ideology

- **Definition:**
 - Beliefs, values, and practices which served to legitimate, support and sustain the authority of the Roman emperors and gave coherence to an otherwise large empire
- **Components:**
 1. **Religious** : The Imperial Cult which was expected to be included in other cults
 2. **Cultural**: Transformation of culture to uniform appearance across empire
 3. **Social**: Laws and norms that regulated family and community life in empire
- **Relevance for Study:**
 - Unifying force for the Empire
 - Propaganda value to Emperor
 - Controlling Zeitgeist against which Judaism & Christianity had to negotiate
 - Should be assumed as contextually operative in studying each New Testament book
 - Study of an Emperor is of limited value to understanding the daily lives of Christians

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ASSASSINATIONS OF ROMAN EMPERORS

Emperor	Assassins
Tiberius (14–37 C.E.)	Probably Gaius Caligula
Caligula (37–41)	Praetorian Guards; Cassius Chaerea; Prefect Arrecinus Clemens; and others
Claudius (41–51)	Agrippina the Younger, the empress
Galba (69)	Praetorian Guards
Vitellius (69)	Vespasian's soldiers
Domitian (81–96)	Stephanus; with Petronius Secundus; Norbanus (a chamberlain); and Domitia Longina, the empress

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Julius Caesar (100-44 BC)

- **Background:** Born into patrician aristocratic family. Ended the series of civil wars
- **Conquests:** Expanded Roman Republic to Gaul (modern-day France) and other regions
- **Political Reforms:** Reforms extended citizenship and introduced the Julian calendar
- **Dictatorship:** Transitioned from a consulship to a dictator with power concentrated in him
- **Assassination:** Assassinated in 44 BC by a group of senators who protested his growing power
- **Legacy:** End of the Republic and rise of Roman Empire under his adopted heir, Augustus.

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Year	Life of Augustus	Judea (New Testament)
63 BC	Gaius Octavius was born on September 23rd in the city of Velletri	Pompey instals Hyrcanus in charge
47 BC	Octavius was made a member of the board of Roman priests, pontifices	
44 BC	Octavius went to Albania to complete his academic and military training.	Parthia conquers Judea; Antipater to Rome
42 BC	Triumvirate of Octavian, Antony & Lepidus defeat Brutus & Crassus in Philippi	
38 BC	Octavian marries Livia Drusilla	Herod returns to reconquer Judea
35-33 BC	Octavian with Agrippa fights campaigns in the Balkan peninsula	
31 BC	Battle of Actium where Anthony is defeated	
30 BCE	Egypt annexed after deaths of Anthony and Cleopatra	
29 BC	Closure of doors of temple Janus – sign of lasting peace	
28 BC	Awarded Augustus title, major census, Senate size timed reduced	Close ties between Augustus & Agrippa
23 BC	Severe illness of Augustus	
20 BC	Peace treaty with Parthia in which Armenia becomes Roman	
19 BC	Law encouraging marriage but punishing adultery and ostentation	
17 BC	Agrippa and Julia had two sons later adopted by Augustus	
12 BC	Augustus becomes <i>Pontifex Maximus</i> , chief priest. Publishes <i>Res Gestae divi</i>	Agrippa dies
6 BC	Senate makes Tiberius tribune	
4 AD	Adopts Tiberius as his son and heir	
6 AD	Rome annexed Judaea & Samaria as province Under king Herod	
14 AD	Died on Aug 19 th at age 76. Designated god by Senate on Sept 17th	

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Augustan Decree & Judaism [*Antiquities* 16:6.2ff]

“Caesar Augustus Pontifex Maximus and Tribune of the people, decrees: Since the Judaeans nation has been found grateful to the Roman people, not only in the present time but also in time past, and particularly in the time of my father Emperor Caesar, as their high priest Hyrcanus, it seemed good to me and to my counselors, with the consent of the Roman people, that the Judaeans may follow their own customs in accordance with the laws of their fathers, just as they followed them in the time of Hyrcanus, high priest of the Most High God, and that their sacred moneys should not be touched, and may be sent up to Jerusalem and delivered to the treasurers in Jerusalem. and that they need not to give bond (appear before the judge) on the Sabbath and on the *paraskeue* [preparation] on the day of preparation (the eve of Sabbath), after the ninth hour.”

Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 16.6.2

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Augustan Decree and Judaism [*Antiquities* 16:6.2ff]

Augustus Caesar decreed that the municipalities in Asia should not force the Judaeans to appear in court on the Sabbath nor after three o'clock P.M. on the eve of Sabbath since the Judaeans in Judaea as well as in the Diaspora did not hold court on the Sabbath nor on the eve of the Sabbath after three o'clock P.M

This, in combination with his personal friendship with Herod the Great, led to centuries of special status for Jews in the Graeco-Roman Empire. For special tax paid in return, Jews were exempted from grotesque public aspects of Imperial cults, and allowed to practice their religion without provincial harassment

Christians who were Jews initially enjoyed this privilege, but over time, with friction, Jews came to regard Christians as undermining their hard-earned privileges and exemptions and soon joined and even led in persecuting Christians

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Augustan *Pax Romana* and Spread of NT Christianity

- **Political:**
 - Peace enabled easy travel by road and sea (cf., 2 Cor 11:25-27)
- **Social:**
 - Extensive road network and the increased shipping from Rome to East
- **Economic:**
 - Thriving economy and progress resulted in relatively well to do middle level Diaspora Jews willing to patronize and support Christians (e.g., Acts 4-6)
- **Cultural:**
 - Increased Public intellectual debates with Graeco-Roman moralists served as opportunity for Christian apologetics and witness
- **Religious:**
 - The active presence of Jewish communities in diaspora acted as fertile grounds for the missionary enterprise

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Imperial Eschatology

The notion that the emperor, especially Augustus, ushered in period of prosperity, stability and peace to the empire. The Priene inscription for example attributes eschatological language to Augustus

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Eschatological terms in Priene Inscription (9 BC) Inaugurating Calendar for Empire

“since Providence (**πρόνοια**), which has divinely (**θείω**) disposed our lives, having employed zeal and ardour, has arranged the most perfect (culmination) for life (**το τεληότατον τῷ βίωι**) by producing Augustus, whom for the benefit of mankind she has filled with excellence (**αρετής**), as [if she had granted him as a saviour (**σωτήρα χαρισάμενη**)] for us and our descendants, (a saviour) who brought war to an end and set [all things] in peaceful order (**κοσμησοντα δε [ειρηνην]**), [and (since) with his appearance (**επιφανείς**)] Caesar exceeded the hopes (**τας ελπίδας [υπερ]έθηκεν**) of all those who had received [glad tidings (**ευαγγέλια**)] before us, not only surpassing those who had been [benefactors] before him, but not even [leaving any] hope [of surpassing him] (**έλπίδ[α] υπερβολής**) for those who are to come in the future, and [since] the beginning of glad tidings (**ευαγγελί[ων]**) on his account for the world was [the birthday] of the god”

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Emperor Augustus and the New Testament

- **Luke 2:1-4:**
 - “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world...And everyone went to their own town to register. So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David”
- **Caesar Augustus [Καίσαρος Αύγουστου]:**
 - Augustus [Majestic] was Latin title conferred by senate. The Greek equivalent Σεβαστοῦ is used by Luke in Acts 25:21. Luke may well be underlining the height of earthly powers
- **A decree [δῶγμα...οἰκουμένην]:**
 - Often debated by scholars but it is more likely used in non-technical terms. Refers to Syrian provincial census done in the spirit of an ideologically coordinated multi-hinged empire wide effort following a previous edict rather than a specific recent edict.
- **Census [ἀπογράφεσθαι]:**
 - Inscription of the name and amount of property in order to facilitate the taxation
- **Divine Providence:**
 - God uses Imperial edict to serve his purposes of the Messiah being born in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2)

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Emperor Tiberius

- **Reign:** 14 -37 AD. He was step-son of Augustus
- **Military campaigns:** Continued the expansion of the Roman Empire through military campaigns in Germania and Pannonia.
- **Administration:** Implemented reforms to strengthen the bureaucracy and legal system.
- **Political intrigues:** Several conflicts with the Senate and treason trials. Retired to Capri for last 11yrs of reign in seclusion.
- **Cultural achievements:** Progress in Roman literature and art labelled by some as "Silver Age" of Latin literature.
- **Succession:** Difficulties in securing a suitable successor, power struggles after his death eventually succeeded by grand-nephew Caligula.

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Emperor Tiberius and the New Testament

- **Lk 3:1-2:**
 - “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Traconitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness.”
- **Eschatological Salvation History in human history:**
 - Public proclamation Gospel was launched when political and religious history was in cahoots and yet with their own shifting arrangements [“many lords” - 1 Cor 8:5b]
- **Fifteenth Year:**
 - Calculated from the co-regency of Tiberius with Augustus (AD 11/12)
- **Tiberius Caesar:**
 - Sea of Galilee named after him as Lake Tiberias or Gennesaret [Jn 6:1, 23; 21:1]
 - City of Tiberias built by Herod Antipas as his new capital and in Tiberius’ honour

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Emperor Caligula

- **Key Events**
 - Acceded in 37 AD, after Tiberius’ death as “Man of the people”, popular
 - 40 AD met with Herod Antipas & Return of Herod Agrippa to Rome
 - Financially profligate with many building (vanity) projects
 - Cruel and tyrannical
 - Numerous public clashes with Senate who eventually supported his assassination
- **The “Comedian” Emperor**
 - Adorned himself with ivy and carried a lyre to imitate Bacchus, demigod of wine and revelry
 - Dressed in a lion’s skin and carried a club to impersonate the demigod Hercules
 - Made his horse a Senator
- **Acted like Divinized human**
 - Wore caduceus, sandals, and tunic of Mercury;
 - Wore garlands, bow, and arrows of Apollos
 - Emblazed his breastplate, sword, and helmet of Mars

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Loyalty Oath sworn by Natives of Aritium [Portugal] to Caligula (37AD)

“On my conscience, I shall be an enemy of those persons whom I know to be enemies of Gaius Caesar Germamcus, and if anyone imperils or shall imperil him or his safety by arms or by civil war. I shall not cease to hunt him down by land and by sea, until he pays the penalty to Caesar in full. I shall not hold myself or my children dearer than his safety and I shall consider as my enemies those persons who are hostile to him. If consciously I swear falsely or am proved false may Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the deified Augustus and all the other immortal gods punish me and my children with loss of country, safety, and all my fortune”

Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL) II: 172

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Caligula's Attempted Installation of Statue and the New Testament

- **Resonances in Jewish history**
 - Antiochus & Seleucid persecution (165 BC).
 - Pompey's incursion into the Holy of Holies (63 BC)
 - Herod's erection of a golden eagle over the gateway to the Temple (5 BC)
 - Pilate's stationing troops with iconic standards in Jerusalem (27AD)
- **Riots among Jews**
 - By Alexandrian Jews
 - By Palestine – attempt to install his statue in the temple
 - By Asian Jews
- **Evocations of Christian apocalyptic eschatology**
 - Mark 13:14 – “abomination of desolation standing where he ought not to be”
 - 2 Thess 2:4 – “exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship...he takes his seat in the temple of God”
- **Gentile Mission inauguration in Antioch (Acts 13)**
 - Legate Petronius who was to implement the instruction was based in Antioch
 - Jewish-Gentile Riots precipitated by the edict
 - Consecration of Paul & Barnabas for the Gentile mission in Acts 13 (= 40 AD) coincided with the edict
 - Interpretation of Caligula's intention through eschatological perspective as reflected in 2Thess 2:4
 - Eschatological interpretation fuelled Gentile mission

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Emperor Claudius

• Key Events

- Succeeded his nephew Caligula in AD 41 with support of Praetorian guard
- Conquered Britain in AD 43 & Mauretania – Expansion of empire boundaries
- Public Infrastructural – roads, bridges, aqueduct & public buildings and monuments
- Famine in Judea of 44 AD (Acts 11:27-30)
- Issued edict [49 AD] expelling Jews due to arguments among them over “Chrestus”
- ?Apocryphal: Queen Protonice, the wife of Claudius, converted to Christianity [In Syriac Doctrine of Addai 7b-11a]

• The “Justice” Emperor

- Legal reforms, granting rights and citizenship to many more to provincial subjects
- Executed his wife Messalina for conspiracy
- Administrative reforms to the Empire Governance & Civil Service

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Claudius and the New Testament

• Acts 18:1-2

- “Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.”

• Important Appointments

- Felix as governor of Judea In AD 57 (Acts 23-24)

• Expulsion of Jews from Rome

- Confirmed by Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* xxv. 4: “Because the Jews were engaged in continuous riots at the instigation of Chrestus, he banished them from Rome“
- Impact on Christianity in Corinth: Aquila & Priscilla then later with Paul
- Impact on the writing of Romans - Friction *among* Christians upon return to Rome
- Relevant for New Testament Dating: The Gallio Inscription

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The Gallio Inscription and Dating of New Testament



Acts 18:12

“While Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment.”

1. Since Gallio was Proconsul in June of AD 51
2. Places Paul in Corinth in AD 52
3. As he in Corinth for 18 mons Paul likely arrived there in AD 50-51
4. NT events preceding this date can be roughly dated within few months

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Emperor Nero

- **Reign:** 54-67 AD; Initially a good emperor but dissipated into archetypal persecutor
- **Cultural pursuits:** Strong interest in the arts and culture. Performed as actor, musician, and charioteer and sponsored artistic projects and constructions, e.g., the Domus Aurea (Golden House).
- **Political instability:** Late reign marked by political unrest and conspiracies, including the Pisonian conspiracy.
- **Military campaigns:** Launched the First Roman–Jewish War (66–73 AD) and campaigns in Britain.
- **Decline of imperial authority:** Towards the end of his reign, Nero's rule became increasingly tyrannical and unpopular. This led to a series of rebellions and eventually his downfall.
- **Great Fire of Rome:** Most infamous event in 64 AD. Speculations as to cause, some think it was deliberate to enable Nero build his new palace. Blamed Christians and used it for their persecution
- **Persecution of Christians:** Nero was known for persecuting Christians following the Great Fire of Rome. Many Christians were arrested, tortured, and executed during his reign.

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Nero and the New Testament

- **Nero & Local Appointees:**
 - Appointed Festus for Judea in AD 59 (Acts 24-26)
 - Paul's Appeal to Caesar Nero (Acts 25:11-12)

- **Nero & Christian Persecution:**
 - Persecution after Great Fire
 - Execution of Paul & Peter

- **Nero & Revelation:**
 - Some scholars have identified him with beast of Rev 12:11–18; 13:11-18 and 17:4–12
 - Interpreted from the 3rd century as (a soon to return) Anti-Christ (2 Thes. 2:3)
 - Some believe he was 666 (Rev 13:18)

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Number of the Beast, 666 in Rev 13:18 & Emperor Nero

“This calls for wisdom. Let the person who has insight calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man. That number is 666.”

Preterist interpreters [that Revelation narrates recent history in allegorical fashion] identify this sea beast with Nero as the number 666 in Gematrian terms represents “Νέρων Καίσαρ [Nero Caesar]” when transliterated into Hebrew.

However, “Νέρων Καίσαρ” was not the usual name or even title of the Emperor, and the first such interpretation on in the 1800s. Also, having to first render it in Greek before calculating the Gematrian number seems convoluted.

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“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 world collect and find a vogue. 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 day light 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.”

Tacitus' Annals 15.44

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Emperor Vespasian

- **Reign:** AD 69-79; Well-travelled as part of army in Empire; commonly labelled as “Reforming Noble Emperor”
- **Healer:** Claimed to be first Emperor with healing powers [a blind & lame]. Probable propaganda, especially as several subsequent emperors were also attributed similar powers
- **Political Stability:** Successfully distanced himself from Nero’s legacy. Stabilized Empire after the chaos of the Year of the Four Emperors. Ushered in the Flavian dynasty.
- **Financial Reforms:** Restored Roman economy by introducing new taxes, such as the tax on public urinals, which famously led to the phrase "*Pecunia non olet*" (money does not stink). Aggressive slave trading
- **Monetary:** Massive minting of coins in his reign - 37.6 million *denarii* (silver coins) per year of his reign
- **Building Projects:** Such as Flavian Amphitheatre (the Colosseum).
- **Military:** Restored stability to the empire with military campaigns in Judea.

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Vespasian and New Testament

- Under whom Jerusalem and its second temple was destroyed in 70AD
- Some have suggested that the socio-historical situation presupposed in Hebrews mirrors what would have occurred in Asia Minor or Italy during the reign of Vespasian (Heb 13:24b)
- It is possible that his time spent in Judea influenced his self-generated myths of performing miracles of similar nature to those performed by Jesus

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Emperor Titus

- Short reign 79-81 AD (26 mons 20 days)
- Successful destruction of Jerusalem and its second temple in AD 70
- Humanitarian relief following eruption of Mount Vesuvius which devastated Pompeii and Herculaneum in AD 79.
- Reconstruction and restoration of Rome after the Great Fire in AD 64.
- Completion of constructing the Colosseum commenced by Vespasian.
- Promotion of public welfare of citizens of Rome making him popular.

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Titus and the Destruction of Jerusalem Temple in New Testament

- A lot depends on interpreters' hermeneutical methodology for linking New Testament teachings to destruction of temple
- Predicted by Jesus - Matt 24:1-2; Mk 13:1-4; Lk 19:43-44; 21:24; [Jn 2:20]
- NT Eschatology
 - Rev 11:1-2: "I was given a reed like a measuring rod and was told, 'Go and measure the temple of God and the altar, with its worshippers. But exclude the outer court; do not measure it, because it has been given to the Gentiles. They will trample on the holy city for 42 months.'"
- NT Soteriology:
 - Some scholars suggest that the destruction enabled the development of early Christian soteriology and that indeed Epistle to the Hebrews which features a lot of this soteriology, and its Christology was written following, and in Christian response to destruction of the temple

33

Emperor Domitian

- Succeeded Titus and ruled from 81-96 AD
- Widely divergent assessment by ancient [Roman elite] historians
 - Some regarded him as a mad tyrant [Tacitus]
 - Others as effective administrator [Pliny]
 - Others, as an average emperor [Suetonius]
 - Thus, Domitian is a test-case of method & perspective of historiography itself
- Psychopathic Tyrant [Second Nero]
 - Cult of Personality
 - Concentrated more power in himself over the Senate
 - Purged and persecuted several senators to control them
- Effective "Administrator" Emperor [Second Tiberius]
 - Fought senatorial corruption and attempted to curb its power
 - Currency devaluation and imposing heavy taxes
 - Jewish temple tax (post 70AD) directed to Rome's temple of Jupiter – price for "leaving Jews alone"
 - Introduced anti-corruption drive of magistrates and efficient provincial government

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Domitian and the New Testament

• The “Second [Nero] Persecutor”

- Eusebius labelled him “second persecutor” after Nero
 - He “killed a significant number of distinguished men at Rome without any reasonable trial, and punished innumerable notable men” [Eusebius *History* 3.17]
 - Many writers labelled Domitian as the originator of systematic emperor sponsored persecution of Jews & Christians
- Concrete evidence is lacking or disputed by some historians
- It is likely that his dual reputation led some local government officials to react by organizing persecution rather than sponsored by the Emperor

• Differences in NT Scholarship is assessing his impact on Christianity:

- Depends on which view is taken as to the nature of persecution in a New Testament book and how systematized Domitian persecution is regarded to be
- Some believe Book of Hebrews addressed Asian Christians under such situations
- Some link Domitian to Book of Revelation
- Some implausibly theorize association with writing of 1 Peter, & of Luke-Acts

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Formative Assessment Question

Evaluate the merits and demerits of the scholarly view that New Testament authors sometimes employed their writings to oppose the Graeco-Roman Empire (1000 words).

36

Arguments that Paul was Pro-Empire

- Conquered people tend to respond to imperial power in three sometimes inter-related strategies:
 - Resistance,
 - Accommodation
 - Sycophantic mimicry.

- Paul's Appeal to his Citizenship

- Paul's exhortation for obedience to Empire
 - Rom 13
 - 1 Tim 2:1-3
 - 1 Thess 4:11

- Paul's Speeches in Roman Court in Acts

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Arguments that Paul was Against Empire

- Imperial Ideological terms are ascribed to Jesus & His people
 - 1 Thess (1:10; 2:12, 19; 3:13; 4:14-18; 5:1-11, 23) God's kingdom and the true Lord,
 - "peace and security"
 - Son of God in Rom 1:4
 - Ecclesia

- 1 Cor 2:6-8 The rulers of this age are explained as adversaries of Christ

- Exalted Christology Phil 2:9 must imply and at least suggestions of anti-empire polemical sentiments

- Socio-historical
 - Evidence of life in Palestine and elsewhere in Empire painted by the Gospels and Acts & also by Josephus suggest that there were widespread anti-empire feelings among the colonized Jews to suggest the plausibility that at least many Christians, including Paul would have been anti-Empire
 - Persecution of Christians, while often local, indicates some animosity or interpretation by community of the Christian message

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Empire and Interpretation of 1 Thess 4:15-5:8

Ειρήνη και ασφάλεια

ἀπάντησιν

παρουσίαν

According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶ For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words. **5 Now, brothers and sisters, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety', destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.' ⁴ But you, brothers and sisters, do not be asleep, but be awake and sober. ⁵ You are all children of the light and children of the day; we do not belong to the night or to the darkness. ⁶ So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be awake and sober. ⁷ For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet..**

Language more characteristic of Jesus' Eschatological Teachings

ἐλπίδα σωτηρίας

The parallels are obvious. But do they represent

- (a) Intentional Polemic Against the Empire?
- (b) Coincidental use of same language to describe different events? ✓
- (c) Use of a common motif as metaphor to convey more profound theological truth? ✓

39

The “peace” that Rome secured through terror was maintained through terror, through slavery, fed by conquest and scrupulously maintained through constant intimidation, abuse, and violence; through the ritualized terror of gladiatorial games, where the human refuse of empire — captives of war, condemned criminals, slaves bought for the arena — were killed in stylized rehearsals of conquest, their fate decided by the whim of the empire’s representatives; through the pomp of military processions, which often culminated in the execution of vanquished captives; and on the ideological plane, through imperial cult and ceremonial, the rhetoric of the courts (where the torture of slaves was a routine procedure for fathering evidence), and an educational system that rehearsed the “naturalness” of Rome’s global hegemony. It was within this civilization of terror that crucifixion played its indispensable role.

[Elliott, Neil, and Richard A. Horsley. "The anti-imperial message of the cross. In Horsley, Richard A., ed. Paul and empire: Religion and power in Roman imperial society. A&C Black, 1997. Pages 167-183. Page 170-171]

40

Babylon the Great and the Seven-headed beast (Rev 17:1-18)

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries...There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns...The name written on her forehead Babylon the great the mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the earth...The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits...The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.'

Preterists see this as referring to Roman Empire, in which case this would clearly be an example of Anti-Empire polemic. However, Babylon could also be employed for human civilization that is opposed to God. In that case not only Rome specifically, but all human civilizations which oppose the divine rule are represented by Babylon the prostitute

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The Problems with Some Anti-Empire interpretations

- Unwarranted extrapolation of local provincial, and often urban enthusiasm for the imperial cult for every part of empire and insisting it to have been programmatic and intended by the emperor
- The NT seems to indicate that the problem started in later stages of the first century, especially as evidenced in Revelation. The imperial cult seems to have been treated as only one of the many manifestations of idolatry and not seem to have received the vigorous opposition that some anti-empire readings envisage
- In many instances, but not all some of the imperial language were clearly propaganda. The earliest Christian may well have chosen to ignore them as empty boasts rather than to have been severely pre-occupied with them as the anti-empire interpretations often envisage

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Summary of Learning Outcomes

1. Cardinal features of Roman Imperial Ideology for interpreting the New Testament
2. Relevance of the reign of Emperor Augustus to the emergence and spread of Christianity
3. Impacts of Emperors (a) Tiberius, (b) Claudius, (c) Vespasian, (d) Titus and (e) Domitian on the history of New Testament Christianity.
4. Evaluate the merits and demerits of the scholarly view that New Testament authors such as Paul used their writings to oppose the Empire.

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Questions?

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