

Roman History in New Testament Times

Introduction

Daniel Institute
BD IV 414 (Biblical Studies)

Dr Annang Asumang

1

The Relevance of the social and cultural history of
the ~~Roman~~ Empire for interpretation of the
Graeco-Roman New Testament

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But they shouted, 'Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!' 'Shall I crucify your king?' Pilate asked. 'We have no king but Caesar,' the chief priests answered
 (John 19:15)

The Roman Empire

Jesus the Christ

The Judeans

Roman imperial politics and theology came face to face with first century Judean piety and religion with Jesus in the centre. And it was out of this that Christianity emerged

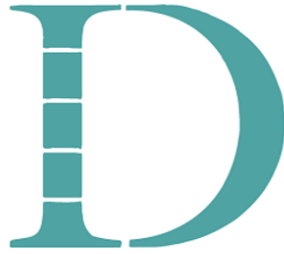
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This course covers the history of Rome in the first century CE from Augustus and the formation of empire to the reign of Domitian and its relevance to Christianity in the first century. Through ancient readings and modern scholarly interpretations, students will meet the ancient Romans: emperors, soldiers, commoners, builders, writers and philosophers. The times of Jesus, the response of the Caesars to Christianity and the persecution of the Christians and the fall of Jerusalem will be given attention.

(Biblical Studies Elective)

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Roman History in New Testament Times



Daniel Institute

BD IV 414 (Undergraduate)

Biblical Studies Elective 3 Credit Hours

Course Handbook

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Ten Lessons of the Course

1. Introduction to the Course
2. Jews in first century Graeco-Roman world
3. The Roman Emperors of the New Testament times
4. Graeco-Roman Local Government
5. Graeco-Roman Culture and Religion
6. Graeco-Roman Philosophical Schools
7. Graeco-Roman *Collegia* and Civic Life
8. Graeco-Roman Military
9. Graeco-Roman Slavery
10. Acts of the Apostle from First Century Graeco-Roman Perspective

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Formative Assessment (60% marks)

Answer two (2) of the following 5 questions, each one thousand (1500) words

1. Evaluate the merits and demerits of the scholarly view that New Testament authors sometimes employed their writings to oppose the Graeco-Roman Empire (1500 words).
2. Describe the relevance of the main features of the Imperial cult of first century Graeco-Roman Empire for interpretation of the New Testament (1500 words).
3. Explain the relevance of the varying responses of first century Jewish sects, namely, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians and the Scribes, to the presence of the Roman colonial agents in Palestine for interpreting the Gospels (1500 words).
4. Using the references to the word “centurion” in Gospel of Luke and Acts of the Apostles, demonstrate the impact of the interactions between first century Christianity and the Roman military establishment (1500 words).
5. How does the nature of slavery in first century Graeco-Roman context enhance your interpretation of Jesus’ washing of His disciples’ feet in John 13? (1500 words).

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Summative Assessment (40% marks)

Multiple Choice Questions based on the course contents

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Learning Outcomes for Introduction

1. Describe the various literary genres of the New Testament and why knowledge of the Graeco-Roman socio-historical background is relevant for their interpretations.
2. Evaluate the contributions and limitations of each of the categories of sources for constructing Graeco-Roman history of the first century AD.
3. Assess the social and historical factors which enabled the Graeco-Roman Empire to serve as the contextual background for the rapid spread of Christianity in the first century.
4. Evaluate the relevance of each of the provinces of the Graeco-Roman Empire during the first century for interpreting the New Testament

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Literary Genre: The Nature of the New Testament Books

- The type of artistic work characterized by its expected style, form, and content
- It dictates the rules the author intended the reader to adopt in interpreting it.
- If the writer intended the piece to be a figure of speech, then the reader would misinterpret them if they believed the genre was literal
- A book of one genre may contain several other types of genres

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Features of the Genres of the New Testament Books

1. **The Gospels**
 - Biography (*bioi*) of Jesus
 - Eyewitness Testimonies of Jesus' Life
 - Historical Material of Jesus' Ministry
 - Early Christian Preaching and Kerygma
 - Theological Deposit of the faith

2. **Acts of the Apostles**
 - Historical Monograph of expansion of Christianity
 - Theological Material on Early Christianity
 - Christian Apologetic to the Empire

3. **The Letters**
 - Communications to Individuals & Churches on the Gospel
 - Theological Material of Apostolic Message
 - Written Homilies (e.g., Hebrews, 1 John, ?Ephesians, 1 Peter)

4. **Revelation**
 1. Prophetic Eschatological Material
 2. Apocalyptic Material of divine intervention in the world
 3. Historical Letters to Churches experiencing apostasy and persecution
 4. Theological Material on the divine triumph

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An apocalypse is prophetic revelation often in a form of vivid and frightening dream or vision full of coded symbolic messages which come in times of national crisis to stir and steer hope in believers but fear and warning of judgement to unbelievers

It comes in times of crisis, and it serves the dual purpose of bringing hope to believers in crisis & warnings to unbelievers

Revelation = Prophecy + Apocalyptic + Epistles

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| Interactions between New Testament Genre & Graeco-Roman History | |
|---|---|
| Genre | Graeco-Roman History |
| Gospel | Historical interaction between Roman Palestine & Jesus' Ministry |
| | Socio-Cultural Backgrounds to interpreting Jesus' Life & Ministry |
| | Jesus' teaching of relevance to colonial politics |
| Acts of Apostles | Historical trajectory of spread of Christianity in Graeco-Roman Empire |
| | Socio-historical & Graeco-Roman Cultural backgrounds for interpretation |
| | Missionary theology in Graeco-Roman context |
| | Rhetorical interpretation from Graeco-Roman categories |
| The Letters | Socio-historical backgrounds of recipient Churches |
| | Rhetorical assessment and interpretation |
| | Socio-religious & political factors influencing apostasy & heterodoxy |
| Revelation | Socio-historical and cultural context of Graeco-Roman regions & empire |
| | Theological interpretation (especially political theology) |
| | Theological basis of Christian response to persecution |

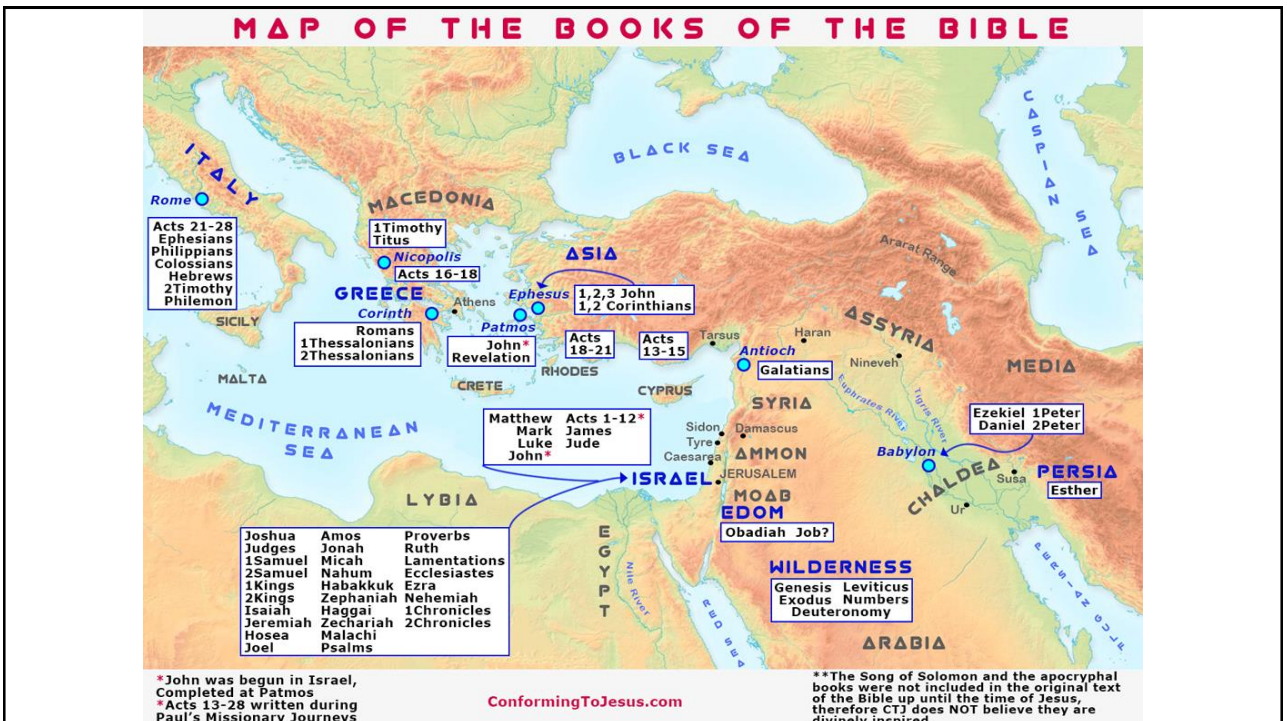
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How we interpret every genre of the New Testament books depend on our in-depth understanding of their complicated interactions with concomitant Graeco-Roman history

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Four Periods of Roman History

- **Regal Period (753 - 509 BC):**
 - Ruled by kings starting with Romulus, son of the god Mars and a Vestal Virgin
- **Republican Period (509 - 27 BC):**
 - Senate
 - Elected two Consuls for the city – powerful precursor of Emperor
 - Elected governors for provinces
- **Imperial Period (27 BC - 284 AD):**
 - Octavian became Augustus as first Emperor
 - Split into two (Western & Eastern) after 284 AD
 - Western Empire dissolved in 476 AD when it fell to Germanic King Odoacer
- **Byzantine (Eastern) Empire (284 - 1453 AD):**
 - Continued till conquest by Ottoman Empire in 1453 AD

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Relevance of Coherent Understanding of Roman History

1. **Verbal Latinisms:** Translation of transliterated Latin words – about 30 words
2. **Idiomatic terms:**
 - Mk 15:15 - ὄχλῳ τὸ ἱκανὸν ποιῆσαι - *satisfacere alicui* – to satisfy the crowd
 - Lk 12:58 - δὸς ἐργασίαν - *da operam* - give diligence
 - 2 Cor 2:14 - θριαμβεύοντι ἡμᾶς ἐν – *triumphare nos* - triumphal procession in [Christ]
3. **Literary Classification of NT:**
 - Genre of New Testament E.g., εὐαγγελίου - Mk 1:1 Christian Gospel vs Roman *Pax Romana*
 - New Testament Letter genre
4. **Philosophical parallels**
 - E.g., Stoic & Epicurean philosophers
5. **Rhetorical Styles & Arrangement of New Testament**
 - Compare with Graeco-Roman writers and theorists e.g., Quintilian's Handbook
6. **Assessment of New Testament's Political Theology**
 - Scholarship debate: Pro, Anti or neutral towards Empire

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Some Transliterated Latin Words in the New Testament

| Domain | Example (Reference NIV) |
|----------------------|--|
| Economic | Coins: ἀσσάριον (penny; Matt 10:29), δηνάριον or δηνάρια (Lk 10:35 – Margin - denarius was the usual daily wage of a day labourer); κοδράντην (penny, Matt 5:26 – a quarter, the very least value, whether money, or property etc) Weights & Measures: λίτρα (half a litre, Jn 12:3); μίλιον (Roman mile, Matt 5:41) |
| Socio-cultural | Μάκελλον (meat market, 1 Cor 10:25), σικάριος (terrorists, Acts 21:38), δίδραγμα (two-drachma temple tax, Matt 17:24); Λιβερτίων (Freedmen, Acts 6:9); λέντιον (towel, Jn 13:4); σουδάρια (handkerchiefs, Acts 19:12); σιμικίνθια (apron, Acts 19:12); μεμβράνας (parchment 2 Tim 4:13). |
| Political & Military | Κεντυρίων (centurion, Mk 15:39); λεγεών (Legion, Matt 26:53); πραιτώριον (praetorium; Jn 18:28), κῆσος (taxes; Matt 17:25); κολωνία (colony Acts 16:12); κουστωδία (secure Matt 27:65-66); σπεκουλάτωρ (executioner, MK 6:27). |
| Others | Φραγέλλιο (whip or scourge, Jn 2:15); ἔχω ([legally] have Lk 14:18); νότου...χῶρον...Εὐρακύλων (south wind...northwest...Northeaster [wind], Acts 27:13-14); Τριῶν ταβέρνα (the Three Taverns Acts 28:15). |

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Historical understanding of how Roman language and culture merged with the Greek and Aramaic culture is relevant for interpreting the New Testament

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Latinisms in Mark's Gospel

| Latin | Greek (English) | Passage |
|------------|---|----------------------------|
| Grabatus | κραβαττος (mat) | 2:4, 2:9, 2:11, 2:12, 6:55 |
| Modius | μοδιον (measuring basket) | 4:21 |
| Legio | Λεγιων (legion) | 5:9, 5:15 |
| Speculator | Σπεκουλατωρ (military scout) | 6:27 |
| Denarius | δηναριον (Roman coin) | 6:37, 12:15, 14:5 |
| Pugnus | πυγμα (fist) | 7:3 |
| Sextarius | ξεστων (quart measure or measuring cup) | 7:4 |
| Census | κῆνσος (capitation tax) | 12:14 |
| Caesar | Καισαρ (Caesar) | 12:14, 12:16, 12:17 |
| Quadrans | κοδραντης (Roman coin) | 12:42 |
| Flagello | φραγελλω (to flog) | 15:15 |
| Praetorium | Πραιτωριον (governor's residence) | 15:16 |
| Centurio | κεντυριων (centurion) | 15:39, 15:44, 15:45 |

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Implications of Latinisms in Mark's Gospel

- Some scholars argue that the phenomenon is strong evidentiary support of the Patristic tradition that Mark wrote his Gospel in Rome with persecuted Roman Christians in mind based on his memoirs of Peter's stories and preaching
- Other scholars point out that most of the Latinized Greek words in Mark were those associated with the Roman military, economic and administrative establishment that was commonly employed in the provinces. Accordingly, they argue that the Latinisms reflect the writing of the Gospel in Palestine, most likely in Galilean Capernaum or even near Caesarea
- My view is in-between. Markan Latinisms reflect more on the author rather than his location. He was a Jewish Hellenized and Romanized author with direct access to the primary eye-witness accounts of Jesus' ministry in Palestine like Peter and other Galileans. John Mark was precisely such a person (Acts 12:12)

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Historical Methodology: How do we do history?

- **Objective of historiography:**

- **General Philosophy:** Ascertain the lives of the people, their relationships, their worldviews, and the social and cultural trends and events, with the aim of attributing relationships, and/or correlations and/or causality that explain them.
- **Specific Objective:** Using the New Testament as window to explain the manner in which first century Graeco-Roman Empire interacted with Christianity.

- **Historical Procedure:**

- Grammatical Exegesis of New Testament passage
- Determine the relevant primary Graeco-Roman historical sources
- Ascertain the background of key Graeco-Roman lexicons, idioms, and concepts
- Socio-historical analysis of New Testament passage
- Evaluate and contextualize the contribution of background to analysis of passage

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Categories of Primary Sources for Graeco-Roman history

1. Literary

- Jewish
- Graeco-Roman
- Others e.g., Aramaic

2. Archaeology

- Excavations: cities & stratigraphy
- Pottery: daily life
- Epigraphy: inscriptions
- Numismatics: coins
- Funerary materials: necropolis & sarcophagi

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Jewish Literary Sources for History of New Testament Era

1. **Old Testament**
 - Ezra 1
 - 2 Chron 36
 - Esther 1
 - Neh 1
 - Daniel 7
2. **New Testament**
 - The Gospels (cf., Lk 1:1-4),
 - Acts: Paradoxically this is **the chief source of Roman provincial historical legal procedures** in middle of first century
 - The Letters
 - Hebrews
 - Revelation
3. **Second Temple Jewish Literature:**
 - The Septuagint
 - Josephus' books,
 - Philo's books
 - Apocrypha
 - Pseudepigrapha
 - Dead Sea Scrolls
 - Rabbinical Literature

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Graeco-Roman Literary Sources for History of New Testament Era

1. **Heroditus – 5th century BC [Father of History]**
 - Graeco-Persian Wars
2. **Polybius – 200 BC ff**
 - *The Histories*
3. **Cicero (106–43 BC)**
 - *De Republica* (On the Republic)
4. **Suetonius (AD c. 69–after 122)**
 - The Twelve Caesars
5. **Tacitus (AD c. 56–c. 120)**
 - "Annals" and "Histories"
6. **Pliny the Elder & Pliny the Younger**
 - The Elder – *Natural Histories*
 - The Younger – *The Epistles with Trajan*

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Two Potential Errors in Using Literary Evidence


• Parallelomania

- Premature attribution of literary dependence due to similarities or parallels
- Frey 2014:210 – “The task is no more simply collecting parallels, nor determining literary dependence, but rather contextualizing texts by means of other texts, putting them in perspective, and reconstructing discourses not only between Jews and Jesus-followers, but rather within a wider Jewish framework in which the early Christian tradition emerged”

• Anachronism

- Retrospectively reading contemporary or later ideas back into historical documents because of same or similar terminologies.
- Reading modern trans-Atlantic American slavery back into slavery of Biblical times



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THE CROSSES OF POMPEII
Jesus-Devotion in a Vesuvian Town

BRUCE W. LONGENECKER

The crosses are few of the several epigraphic evidence suggesting Christian presence in Pompeii

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“Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. Here a great number of disabled people used to lie – the blind, the lame, the paralysed.”

John 5:2-4



Excavation of Pool of Bethesda

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Archeological confirmations of geographical and historical details of John 5 have revised discussions regarding earlier dating of writing of John’s Gospel

Moreover, these discoveries have shown that first century Jerusalem was thoroughly Romanized, and the temple itself bore significant Hellenistic-Roman features that requires our revision of perceptions of its culture

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Brief Political History of Mediterranean World

- **Medo-Persian Empire period (539-331 BC)**
 - Launched by Cyrus the Great; later Queen Esther
 - Return to Jerusalem, Rebuilding of Second Temple; Nehemiah & Ezra period
- **Graeco-Macedonian Empire Alexander the Great's conquests (331-143 BC)**
 - Hellenization:
 - Politics & Religion: Greek cities all over empire with temples where Greek gods to be worshiped
 - Economy: Single currency & economy
 - Culture: Greek language, culture, public gymnasia and sense of individualism to the tribes
 - Break-Up of Empire after Alexander's Death
 - Ptolemaic kingdom of Hellenistic Egyptian rulers (305-30 BC)
 - Seleucid kingdom of Hellenistic Syrian rulers (312-63BC)
 - Judean Independence in the Maccabean & Hasmonean (roughly synonymous) dynasties (143-63 BC)
 - Herodian dynasty (Idumean who was incorporated into Hasmonean dynasty (37-4BC)
- **Graeco-Roman Era from 63 BC**
 - Romans added Law & order and single-minded grit to Greek artistry and individualism.
 - Rome added strategic thinking, road and construction building to Greek beauty
 - Empire Launched by first triumvirate (Julius Caesar, Pompey & Crassus)
 - Best time under the long reign of Augustus (Octavia) after death of Caesar
 - Roman Imperial Ideology: images, shrines, temples, sacrifices and festivals of the emperor cult in empire
 - Destruction of Jerusalem in 70AD and its religious repercussions

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The Distinctive Roman Ethos

“We have excelled neither Spain in population, nor Gaul in vigour, nor Carthage in versatility, nor Greece in art, nor, indeed Italy and Latium itself in the innate sensibility characteristic of this land and its peoples, but in piety, in devotion to religion, ... we have excelled every race and every nation.”

↓
Strong will and Grit to succeed

Cicero, Concerning the Response of the Soothsayers 9.19

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Why Graeco-Roman Empire served as Fertile Ground for Christianity

- Hellenization & Romanization
- Common Language
- Growth of urbanization in early first century
 - Organization of provinces & cities enabled each to know how they fitted in Empire
 - Artisans needed
 - Movement of workers to urban centres
 - Metropolitan mixing of populations
- Excellent Roads, Pax Romana, & pacification of pirates made travel easier
- Jewish diaspora presence in Empire
- Initial Openness of Romans to all religions
- Diversity of each region allowed for diversity of evangelism
- Persecution ultimately catalyzed spread

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Roman Palestine in the Gospels and Acts

Other New Testament Books

- Epistle of James*
- Jude*
- ??Colossians** [?Caesarean prison?]



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Graeco-Roman Syria in New Testament Times

- Centre of Seleucid Empire until conquered by Rome in 63BC
- East most edge of Graeco-Roman Empire and bulwark against the Parthians
- Had considerable influence on Palestine and often seat of Regional Gov't
- Antiochus IV Epiphanes (215-165 BC) most infamous ruler (Jewish perspective)
- Capital Antioch was third most important city after Rome & Alexandria
- Major center of commerce, intellectual and religious diversity
- Metropolitan with Jews, Greek, Romans and Eastern peoples

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Roman Syria Covered by Acts



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Asia Minor in New Testament Times

- Rich Historical background
 - Hittite Empire 1600-1180 BC followed by Anatolia Civilization
 - Anatolian Civilization fully Hellenized 750-31 BC
 - Romanized with enthusiasm exceeding the Romans (200 BC - AD 395)
- Thriving Jewish communities who led in persecution of Christians
- Most ardent supporters of the Imperial cult
- Capital moved from Pergamum to Ephesus by Romans
- Cities competed with each regarding degree of Romanization
- Dominance of goddess Artemis but also challenged by eastern mysticism and folk religion in Phrygian Galatia and Lycus Valley
- Persecution of Christians emerged early and persisted reflected in letters to 7 churches
- Apostle Peter's two letters to Northern parts of the region

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Macedonia & Achaia in New Testament Times

- Macedonia & Achaia formed part of Greco-Macedonian Empire.
- Alexander the Great grew up in and was educated by Aristotle Macedonia where his father was Philip of Macedon
- Octavian & Antony defeated Crassus and Brutus here to usher new era
- Thessalonica along Egnatian Way made it excellent capital attracting traders, philosophers and religions
- Philippi & Thessalonica specially set up as Roman colony to settle veteran Roman soldiers and officers was prosperous and higher class
- Achaia's capital was Athens, but nearby Corinth with its port gained prominence as it was re-founded by Caesar in 44BC & repopulated with freed slaves, Jews and Roman officials to become city for the upwardly mobile
- Paul's initial Church planting mission to Thessalonica & Philippi were spectacular and very fruitful. He was directed there through a dream
- Both were also associated with significant persecution

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Acts 17:6b:

“These who have turned the world upside down have come here too” (NKJV)

The Thessalonians, having joined the losing side in the Octavian vs. Brutus war, from then on became highly sensitive to any impression of disruption of the peace fearing it would be wrongly interpreted by the Romans. In addition to becoming sycophantic to Rome, they took over-the-top measures to prevent any incident giving perception of enthusiasm for anything that would not be regarded as full support for empire.

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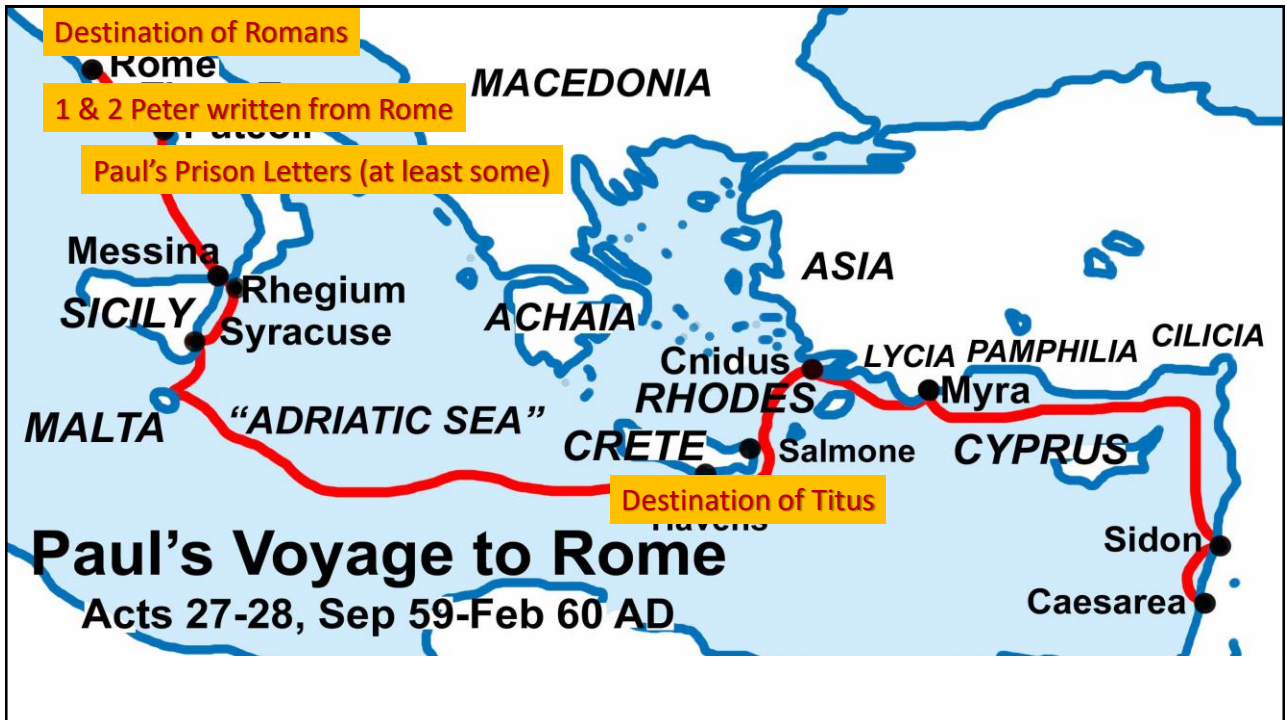


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The West (Rome) in New Testament Times

- Capital of the Empire
- Had significant number of Jews, some converting. Intermittent disputes with Christians in first century
- Claudius edict in 49AD (Acts 18:2) is said to have contributed later to friction among Jewish and Gentile Christians there
- Hispania was further west but not enough evidence in Bible of Christian influence even though Paul is said to have evangelized there
- Imprisonments of Paul, and later Peter here
- Destination of Romans, and place of origin of several letters

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Summary

1. All the literary genres of the New Testament require knowledge of the Graeco-Roman socio-historical background for their interpretations.
2. The primary sources for constructing this history may be categorized into literary and archaeological.
3. Factors which enabled the Graeco-Roman Empire to serve as the contextual background for the rapid spread of Christianity in the first century range from cultural, social, political, economic and persecution .
4. Each of the provinces of the Graeco-Roman Empire during the first century has relevance for understanding the New Testament.

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Questions?