

Romans, Jews, and Early Christians

by Jon Donahue, September 2023

Retired in my little town of Tombstone, Arizona, out in the middle of nowhere on a mesa in the high desert, I realized one evening after bible study at St. Paul's Episcopal Church that my friends certainly knew the scriptures, but not too much about the Roman world that Jesus and the early apostles lived in. This may help, a brief history of those times from a Roman rather than Christian point of view. For dates, am using the older BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini) markers that I grew up with, rather than the newer BCE (Before Christian Era) and CE (Christian Era). This story starts about 2,000 years ago, halfway around the world, in Italy and also in Israel. Where many places exist over the centuries without problems, wars, or trouble, other areas, like Israel, are constantly in upheaval and turmoil, back then same as today. The ancient Romans were able to accomodate the Jews in their empire, but ran into problems with the followers of a Jewish prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. Here's how it went.

Before the birth of Christ

By the time Julius Caesar's nephew Octavian became the first Roman Emperor in 27 BC, his emerging empire had endured civil wars for more than 50 years, back to Sulla's Social War in 90 BC and the Spartacus Gladiator Revolt in 73 BC. Honored with the title Augustus, Octavian promised to deliver lasting peace, and also to restore traditional Roman morals and values. He had solid support from his legions, after defeating Cassius, Brutus, and Pompey. His defeat of Mark Anthony gave him Egypt, primary food supplier to the large cities in the new empire. Augustus used his newfound money to provide free bread for the poor tenement dwellers in Rome, mostly ex-farmers forced off their ancestral lands by the civil wars, and by the new large latifundia corporate farms.

In sum, Augustus was popular without opposition because he brought a lasting peace to Italy and its allied countries. Called the Pax Romana, it lasted for centuries because of the deep, deep fear of both rich and poor of another outbreak of civil war. Augustus shared this fear, and passed two laws to severely punish

anyone upsetting the peace, the social order. The first was the Lex Maeistatis, with death as punishment for disrespecting the Gods and the government, a crime striking at the heart of their hard-won civil order. The Romans believed that even a single recusant could bring down the anger of the neglected Gods.

The second law was Lex Julia, also punishable by death for crimes like joining an illegal association. Augustan Romans had freedom of speech, but not of assembly. For example, you could criticize the Emperor publicly, or make lewd jokes about his performance with various lovers -- but you could not do that in a group in private, like a dinner club. Groups, collegia, were strictly regulated by the state, and tightly controlled, as they were obvious places to foment civil disorder. However, Lex Julia collegia prosecutions were rare. Local prosecutors often looked the other way at unlicensed groups of bakers, tailors, and other tradespeople. But the law was there should any group start making trouble. Unlike Jews, Christians by definition were an illegal group, as their members would not swear allegiance to the Emperor or sacrifice to the Roman Gods. But most often, local magistrates like Pontius Pilate gave accused Christians three chances to recant. The death penalty was taken seriously then, as it is today. Falsely accusing an enemy of being Christian was a crime.

From the time of Augustus, Roman cities were packed with poor people, with a population density twice New York's today. Protest marches, like for more food, were stage-managed by an Aedile, the official in charge of public welfare, gaining popularity by agreeing to the protesters' demands. Because everyone was deeply afraid of another civil war, there were no protests demanding a change of the government itself, and Augustus reigned as the first Roman Emperor for 41 years, until he died in 14 AD.

During Christ's life

Obviously, there were no Christians in Rome or anywhere else during this time, since Jesus was probably born in 4 BC. But there were large numbers of Jews living in both Rome and the empire's major cities, like Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Antioch. Herod the Great, King of Judea, was a true friend of both Anthony and Augustus, following in the footsteps of his father, Herod Antipater, who had been friends with Julius Caesar. Like his father, King Herod stayed loyal to the winners

of the Roman wars that followed Caesar's assassination -- backing Octavian/Augustus against Cassius, Pompey, and Marc Anthony. But unlike his father, Herod was a vicious psychotic, repeatedly murdering his own family members and anyone he suspected might overthrow him. Against that, he was a real builder. He restored the Temple at Jerusalem, built a large port for the Roman fleets called Caesaria Maritima, and smaller forts like Masada and Herodium. For the Romans, Herod and the Jews were a bulwark against their real enemy, the Parthians in today's Syria and Iraq, and also against Arab tribes across the Jordan River and to the southeast. Years before, the Parthians defeated Crassus and several Roman legions at Carrhae, in today's eastern Turkey. Although Augustus negotiated an uneasy truce with the Parthian king, they remained a true threat to the eastern Roman empire.

As an ally, Herod asked for and got concessions for the Jews from Roman laws -- less taxes from time to time, and no military service. He ruled by fear, backed by Roman power. Stationing Roman soldiers at the Antonine fort in the Temple lost him support from both Saducees and Pharisees. Interestingly, both the Pharisees and Essenes believed in an afterlife with Jehovah for the good, and eternal punishment for the wicked. The Saducees, like today's Jews, believed that souls died with their bodies.

King Herod the Great died in 4 BC, and his son Herod Antipas continued the friendship with Emperor Augustus (27 BC-14 AD) and then with Emperor Tiberius (14-37), Augustus's successor. Herod Antipas, whom Tiberius made ruler of Galilee, built the city of Tiberias not far from Nazareth, hoping to attract new business with more tax money that he could send to Tiberius in Rome to gain favor, hoping to be appointed king of all Israel like his father had been. It is likely that Jesus and his older brother James worked as laborers and carpenters at the new city. This was a time of great popular unrest, with Herod Antipas and Roman soldiers putting down successive insurrections. Where most were against Roman power, Jesus' crusade was against the priests running the Temple in Jerusalem, who had raised the fees people had to pay to worship. His 'Render unto Caesar...' seemed to indicate that he had no quarrel against Roman authority, but he was executed anyway, like many other revolutionaries of that time.

His death went unnoticed in Rome, of course. Romans at that time were caught up in a huge scandal involving the Temple of Isis. The high priestess, a chaste Roman lady, was seduced by a man who came to her in the dark of night, pretending to be the Egyptian god Anubis. When the story came out, Emperor Tiberius banned the Isis cult and evicted the Isis worshippers from the city.

After Christ's death

Jesus died about 30 AD. By this time, there were large numbers of Jews living in Rome, thanks to the long Herodian support of the imperial government. Jews also settled in the other major cities in the Empire... Alexandria, Tarsus, Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth and Phillippi. They were not well-liked by their fellow non-Jewish citizens, because of the special favors secured by Herod. They were not required to pray to the Roman Gods, like Jupiter, Mars, and the Vestals -- nor to go into the army. They did not have to attend public events on their Sabbath. They were exempt from many Roman taxes.

Jews were resented, but tolerated since Emperor Augustus had granted their religion official status, allowing the Jewish collegia to assemble and worship as they wished. This was normal Roman practice, with the many other religious sects also allowed freedom of worship as long as they didn't rock the boat. Like the other legal faiths -- the followers of Cybele, Isis, Serapis, Apollo, Sol Invictas, and Mithras, favorite God of Roman soldiers -- the Jews swore allegiance to the state once a year, but unlike the others, were exempted from praying to Augustus in his role as a divine leader. This alone, coupled with their insularity and resistance to intermarriage with other Roman citizens, added to their unpopularity.

The real problems began after the death of Jesus. By then, the Emperor Tiberius expanded the Lex Maeistatis to include treason, now next to sacrilege in gravity. Tiberius also encouraged professional informers, called 'delatores'. Less than 10 years later, by 40 AD, the first Jews who believed that Jesus was their Messiah began arriving in Roman cities. Sporadically, after riots broke out, the Roman government banned Jews from the city of Rome itself for a short time. In his 119 AD 'De Vita Caesarum' history, Suetonius wrote that, 'Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Christians, the Emperor Claudius expelled them from Rome'. When a fire in 64 AD burned down a large part of Rome,

Emperor Nero (54-68) accused and executed at least 1,000 early Christians for setting fire to the city. After this, the Lex Maiestatis laws held that just confessing to be Christian, 'Nomen Ipsum Per Se (the name speaks for itself)', warranted the death penalty.

St. Paul and the Romans

The story of Saul, a Jewish Roman citizen from Tarsus in southern Turkey, clarifies details of the Roman-Christian collision. A few years after the death of Jesus, Saul went from Jerusalem to Damascus. On the way, he was temporarily blinded by the light of God, or perhaps a stroke, resulting in a name change from Saul to Paul and his taking up a mission to preach the teachings of Jesus to the Gentiles, or non-Jews. This led to Paul being thrown out of Damascus in 39 AD after bitter arguments with his fellow Jews, probably about his claim that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah.

He returned to Jerusalem, and, after more arguments with the apostles, came away with an agreement -- he would be allowed to preach to the Gentiles outside of Judea, leaving Jesus's brother James, leader of the sect, to preach to the Jews in Jerusalem. This was a change, as Jesus had clearly said that his disciples were to teach his fellow Jews, not outsiders. "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-6).

Paul was a city kid, and for the next 15 years, he traveled to the major cities in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire. Cities with Jewish synagogues. Antioch in Syria, Antioch in Turkey, Tarsus, Ephesus, Troas, Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens and Corinth. He avoided purely Gentile areas, as when he said God told him not to go north to Bithynia, a solidly pagan Roman province in northern Turkey. Smart move, because it was very hard to convert someone from their native faith, like the followers of Isis, to a brand new one. No, Paul found his sweet spot in the Jewish synagogues. As noted above, the Romans kept a very close eye on collegia, and we have several records of synagogue attendance. Jews of course, and then non-Jews who were interested in maybe becoming Jews, and then a few pagans who weren't.

In city after city, Paul went after the second group... Gentiles who were thinking about becoming Jews. And, in city after city, this often led to violent confrontations

with the local Jews and their leaders, who rightly felt that Paul was trying to steal members of their congregations for his new Jewish sub-cult. Congregation poaching. Repeatedly, angry Jews went to their Roman governors, demanding that Paul be arrested and executed under the Lex Maestatis law, same as Jesus not too many years before. Because Paul, and his new followers, absolutely refused to pray to the Emperor in his role as Divi Filius... Jesus wasn't the only person to claim Son of God status... or to pray to the other Roman Gods.

While the Jews were exempt from Emperor worship, Paul's sub-cult was not, with the angry Jews insisting that Paul was no longer Jewish. The Roman government agreed, stating that Paul and his followers were an illicit collegia and obnoxious troublemakers. Enemies of the state. By the time of Nero in 54 AD, the Romans called them 'Christiani', and executed anyone calling themselves Christian, under the 'Nomen Ipsum Per Se' (the name speaks for itself) laws.

But the further you were away from Rome, the more sporadic the proscription. According to the Acts of the Apostles, when Junius Gallio was proconsul of Achaia in Greece, Paul the apostle was brought in front of him by Sosthenes, head of the local synagogue at Corinth, with the accusation of having violated Mosaic Law. Gallio, however, was indifferent towards religious disputes between the Jews and Jewish Christians. He dismissed the charges against Paul (denegatio actionis) and had both him and the Jews removed from the court (Acts 18:12-17). Gallio's tenure can be accurately dated to between AD 51–52, giving us one of the few solid dates related to Paul and his travels. Other magistrates, like Pilate, gave accused Christians three tries to recant, carefully explaining that refusal meant death.

But back to Paul. Walking, hitching rides in wagons, and then by boat, he made three long trips from 47 AD to 56 AD across Greece and Turkey. During his second trip, he was freed by Proconsul Gallio. At the end of his third trip in 56 AD, he returned to Israel, hoping in Romans 15:30-32 "... that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea." Taking a money donation from Christian Gentiles to the Temple, he was violently attacked for bringing outsiders into the inner Court of The Jews (Acts 21:27-28). He was then arrested by the Roman temple guards, and sent to be tried in Rome since he was a Roman citizen. We have no record of his trial there, but it seems he was freed once again, since Luke, writing in Acts 28:30-

31, says that Paul "lived there two whole years at his own expense." After that? There's an account in 1 Clement that Paul went to Spain, then returned to Rome and was martyred, but this is historically murky.

Most probable is that Paul, along with Peter and more than 1,000 early Christians living in Rome, were massacred by Emperor Nero in the summer of 64 AD following a huge fire that burnt down a large part of the capitol city. There were no trials, and we have no records. The Christians, by this time seen as a distinct sect from the Jews, were rounded up and summarily executed under the Lex Maeistatis 'threat to the state' law. They were eaten alive by wild animals in the arena, or crucified and then burned as living torches to illuminate the streets at night. Most Romans approved, after years of rumors that the Christians were baby-eating cannibals, immoral molesters of young virgins, etc. We know historically what the rumors were, but not who started them. But the conflicts with mainstream Jews were the same in Rome as in the other major Roman cities. Most people believed Nero's claim that the Christians had set fire to the city, although some said Nero did it himself. There is no historical record one way or the other. Most probable was not arson, but maybe a cooking fire igniting a crowded firetrap wooden tenement. At any rate, it is clear from the later writings of Suetonius, Tacitus, and Marcus Aurelius that Nero had certainly solved the Christian problem, with widespread popular approval. For about 150 years, anyway.

Jesus and revolution in Judea

But while Rome was calm, violent revolts in Judea led to the First Jewish War in 66-73 AD. Actually, it was the result of problems from years before. When Herod the Great died in 4 BC, small rebellions broke out across Israel. The Romans sent two legions under Varus down from Iraq, where they were parked to confront the Parthians, along the Euphrates River. They destroyed the rebels at Sepphoris, a small city in Galilee, only four miles from the tiny village of Nazareth, in the same year when most historians agree Jesus was born. Emperor Augustus then divided Israel among four of Herod's relatives. One of them, his son Herod Antipas, got Galilee and Perea.

But the revolts continued. Smaller, no need to call in the army. During the 20s, with the new Emperor Tiberius now in Rome, many prophets sprang up with a

similar message -- that the Messiah was coming to deliver the Jews from Roman occupation. The Galilean John the Baptist, probably an Essene, preached that if most people became baptized, God would help them get rid of the Romans. So they executed him around 30 AD, but not his followers, as his movement didn't amount to much.

One of John's baptized was Jesus of Nazereth, who probably had worked during the 20s as a carpenter following his older brothers to help build a new city not far from Nazareth. Herod Antipas commissioned it, calling it Tiberias to please the Emperor who he hoped would make him king of all Israel. Cities meant new businesses, and more people to tax... new taxes that Herod Antipas could send to Rome to gain royal favor. But Galilee was historically a hotbed of Jewish agitators and revolutionaries. Jesus certainly rose in revolt, but not directly against the Romans. To avoid John's fate, he went up against the priesthood running the Temple in Jerusalem. They had greatly raised the fees that Jesus's poor Galilean Jews had to pay when visiting the Temple, in order to raise the money demanded by Herod Antipas and the Romans. But while his message was different from John's, with disclaimers like 'Render unto Caesar...!', it didn't work, and a crowd of angry Temple-loyal Jews dragged him in front of Pontius Pilate, Jesus refused to swear allegiance to Rome and to recognize Emperor Tiberius as a God, and that was that. Like John, the Romans didn't bother to round up Jesus's followers. There weren't many, and he hadn't preached violent revolution.

Others did. John the Baptist, arguably. And then in the 30s, just as Paul set out on his first short trip to Petra in today's Jordan in 35 AD, to what the Romans called Arabia... there was increasing violence, after Herod Antipas was deposed by a relative. Josephus in his 'History of the Jews' describes how the Sicarii, so named after their short daggers, murdered Jonathan, the Temple's high priest, in 37. Violence continued across Israel, with Roman officials frequently attacked by the terrorists. These events increased the resentment against the Jews across the Empire, culminating in Nero's persecutions after the fire in 64 AD. In 66 AD, the Roman governor Florus took money from the Temple and arrested Jewish leaders. A full-scale revolt erupted, with the Sicarii ambushing and destroying the XII Roman Legion sent down from Syria, at the battle of Beth Horon in Galilee. With 6,000 Romans dead, the Jews captured the legion's aquila standard, and then proclaimed their independence.

It was short-lived. Nero died in 68 AD after banishing Jews from the city of Rome, and was succeeded by Vespasian, who sent his son Titus Vespasianus with four legions to crush the rebellion in Israel. In April 70 AD, three days before Passover, the Roman army started besieging Jerusalem. The city had been taken over by several rebel factions following a period of massive unrest and the collapse of a short-lived provisional government. In August, Roman forces overwhelmed the defenders and set fire to the Temple. Resistance continued for another month, but eventually the upper and lower parts of the city were taken as well, and the city was burned to the ground.

By this time the early Christians were writing their Gospels, and of course recounted how Jesus had predicted all this, as in Matthew 24-- "Jesus left the temple and was going away, when his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. 2 But he answered them, "You see all these, do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." The elimination of the symbolic centre of Judaism and Jewish identity led many of the Jews to leave, the diaspora, scattering to safer places across the Roman Empire.

It happened again. In 132 AD, Bar Kokhba led a rebellion against Emperor Hadrian, a revolt connected with the Roman renaming of Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina. After four years of devastating warfare, the uprising was suppressed, and Jews were forbidden access to Jerusalem.

Later years

As time passed, the Romans slowly recognized that the Christians, while superstitious, immoral, and irritating, were not out to overthrow the state. In 112 AD, Pliny the Younger, Governor of Bithynia, wrote to Emperor Trajan (98-117) that it seemed the Christians were harmless, and that he wanted to stop executing them under the Nomen policy. Trajan agreed, and by the end of that second century AD, random persecutions of Christians had mostly ended, as evidenced by Emperor Trajan's correspondence with Pliny, and by the writings of Emperors Hadrian (117-138) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180).

Surprisingly, under Marcus Aurelius's certifiably crazy son Commodus (180-192, see the movie 'Gladiator'), persecutions of Christians stopped, as Commodus set

out to become an absolute dictator while enjoying himself fighting fixed gladiator matches in the Coliseum. By the year 200 AD, the start of the third century since the birth of Christ, Christians were definitely seen as distinct from Jews, not just as a Jewish sub-cult. As their numbers grew and they showed no interest in overthrowing the state, they were increasingly tolerated if not well-liked.

The rest, as they say, is history. A story for another day, as the number of Christians increased, and then Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337) converted to Christianity, influenced by his mother Helena, the first religious tourist, who had brought back a piece of the one true cross from the Holy Land. He played an influential role in the proclamation of the Edict of Milan in 313, which declared tolerance for Christianity in the Roman Empire. Constantine convoked the First Council of Nicaea in 325, which produced the statement of Christian belief known as the Nicene Creed. Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire when Emperor Theodosius I issued the Edict of Thessalonica in 380, and here we are.

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