



# IT'S 56 A.D.

**A brief comparison of life views and situations soon after Jesus' crucifixion as seen through the eyes of a Roman, a Palestinian Jew, and (a new social stratum) a Christian.**

HPC Trinity Class

April 14, 2024

## Imagine that you are a Roman citizen living in Rome

### The City of Rome

- ❖ The Jews, who were kicked out of Rome in 49 A.D., are back!
  - They were expelled for causing riots. ("Chrestus riots," as later described by the Roman historian/politician Suetonius.) They weren't banned because of their faith.

**[READ ACTS 18:1-3]**

- "Rome is a cesspool of iniquity," according to the Seneca, the leading Roman statesman of this time. The city was huge, nearing one million people, and it was a noisy place—so noisy that Ceasar wanted to ban chariots on the streets during the daytime.
  - Throughout the next century it would explode with refugees from surrounding countries. Most lived in tenement slums, which were too often wooden fire traps.
  - Jews comprised only @40-50,000 of the population.

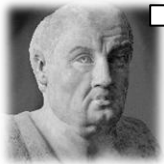
- ❖ Nero was now the emperor, ruling from 54-68 A.D. By all accounts, during his early years he was an excellent leader **[READ ROMANS 13:1-2].**

**So what happened to make him go "bad?"**

- ❖ About 40-50% of the empire's population were slaves and this huge city was no exception. The Roman economy would have crumbled immediately without their skilled and unskilled labor.

### Your Religious Beliefs

- ❖ You would have had many gods, which included the emperor.
  - You also had hundreds of household gods. For example:
    - Forculus, god of the doors
    - Cardea or Carna, goddess of the door hinges
    - Limentirus, god of the thresholds.



- ❖ Christianity came to Rome @50 A.D. Christians, however, are mono-theistic, and therefore, in your mind they were unreligious AND unpatriotic (i.e., no emperor worship). No one in your circle of friends would have followed Jesus.



- ❖ The government did permit its subjects to worship other gods...as long as they also made offerings to the Roman ones. That's why Judaism was permitted. Jews had to register with the government and wear distinct clothing.
  - Life after death was a foreign concept to the Romans. "Salvation" had nothing to do with heaven or God; it only referred to some benefit of this material world. The Greek notion of an immortal soul was likewise foreign.
- ❖ "In Roman belief, a sort of contract existed between the people and their gods. In exchange for the Romans practicing the required religious rituals, the gods would ensure prosperity, health, and military success."<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ The average Roman probably did not know the difference between a Jew and a Christian. (The word "Christian" is not found in any Roman writings until after 70 A.D. and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.)
- ❖ Greek and Roman gods were beginning to blend together.
 

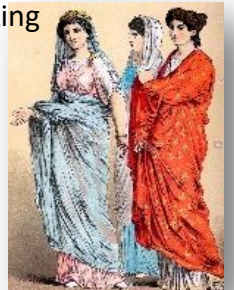
For example: **Jupiter (Roman) = Zeus (Greek)** and **Neptune (R) = Poseidon (G)**
- ❖ Dancing was not to be done except for infrequent religious dances.

## Society

- ❖ Rome had four classes of inhabitants at this time:
  1. **Patricians**—they were the few, having both wealth and power. These would be the emperor's friends, who live in villas in the nearby hills.
  2. **Equestrians**--- also wealthy. These were families of the original Roman cavalry stretching back several hundred years. Many Senators were from the Equestrian ranks.
    - Why aren't Senators listed as a class in society?**
  3. **Plebeians** ---free men but with limited wealth or power. This was the working class, the commoners.
  4. **Slaves**---no rights. Aristotle defined a slave as a piece of living property.



- ❖ Togas were unique to the city of Rome and were worn only by high class men and prostitutes (and John Belushi in *Animal House*.) Commoners wore tunics. Women wore stolas. Wealthy women dyed their hair, with blonde and red being favored.



<sup>1</sup> Tolerance

- ❖ You would have been:
  - very fond of house pets (cats, dogs).
  - quite superstitious. Every person, place, & thing had its own divine soul. “Left” was unlucky.
  - a strong believer in law and order. Nero was a good guy in your mind.
- ❖ Christians were considered strange people who were anti-social. Avoid them.
- ❖ You still spoke mostly Greek, though by now Vulgar Latin was quickly creeping into the culture. To advance upwardly one had to know Classical Latin as well as Greek. After the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.D. Latin prevailed.
- ❖ Don’t worry about being crucified; that punishment was so horrible that was reserved for only foreigners. The worst punishment dealt to citizens was beheading— this included anyone who pretended to be a Roman citizen.
- ❖ Land ownership was crucial if one wanted to succeed. Almost all Roman citizens owned at least a small plot.
- ❖ Roman names signified one’s identity. Men had three names (e.g., Gaius Julius Caesar), and it was a criminal offense to use the three-part name (the *tria nomina*) if one was not a Roman citizen.



Emperor of the Roman Empire,  
Septimius Severus, 193 A.D.

### Family

- ❖ Women were not full citizens. They could not vote nor participate in politics.
- ❖ Husbands had absolute power in the household. They could force a marriage, sell their kids into slavery, and dishonestly claim a dependent’s property as his own.

### Marriage

- ❖ Marriages were done for financial gain and political power, not for love. The only legal marriages were between Roman citizens. A citizen could not marry a slave unless that slave was first set free. Even then, society looked down upon a man who wedded his former slave girl because he was officially her “father.”
- ❖ Marriage (*conubium*) between slaves was not legal. Instead, any union between male and female slaves was called “*contubernium*.” It was a ceremony that had to be approved by the slave owner who hoped for many future slaves to be born as a result.
  - Girls could marry at age 12; boys at 14. Few women remained unmarried by age 20.
  - Polygamy was illegal.

- The custom of a man kissing his wife upon returning home is said to have come from ancient Rome: he kissed her upon the lips to determine if she had been drinking excess wine while he was gone.

- **Divorces** were frequent--
  - ◆ wives could initiate divorce.
  - ◆ the father always retained custody of any children.

❖ Your family was typical if it had one to two children. Some had as many as three. Unwanted children were often sold as slaves. Infanticide was seldom practiced by this time, and husbands were punished if they killed family members.

- **Children** were given Greek names.
  - ◆ they were forbidden to speak freely.
  - ◆ little affection was to be shown towards them.
  - ◆ education began for boys at age seven, in-home or private school. Girls did not need any education except for what was needed in homemaking and child rearing.
    - Slaves were used to escort young boys to school and to help them with their homework.<sup>2</sup> Rote memorization was the heart and soul of ancient learning—a key tool in this oral-centered culture.
    - Elementary classes included grammar, geometry, astronomy, music, and some philosophy.



### Slaves

- ❖ Slaves were often considered members of the family. “We must resist the temptation to equate ancient slavery with the antebellum slavery in nineteenth-century America.... Some of the most highly educated and brilliant persons of the Roman Empire, and some of its best businessmen, were or had been slaves.”<sup>3</sup>
  - “Slaves tended to have identifiable hair styles and dress so they could be recognized in public and distinguished from citizens.”<sup>4</sup> Ironically, if a slave managed to gain his freedom he could, by law, obtain Roman citizenship. Almost overnight he would go from a dishonorable status to an honorable one.

<sup>2</sup> These slaves were called *paidagogos* from which we get “pedagogue” (school teacher).

<sup>3</sup> Witherington, pg. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 128.

- There was a vast difference between slaves who worked in the mines and those who were “domesticated” household slaves. Keep in mind the manner in which many of these foreign people became slaves of Rome: they were in the opposing army and became war prisoners---these were tough, hardened men.
- The poet Horace, who lived shortly before Jesus’ time, implied that “even a gentleman in moderate circumstances had to have at least ten slaves.”
- ❖ The grandparents’ role in the family was minimal, probably due to early deaths.

### Daily Life

- ❖ Your diet would have consisted mostly of starches with few fresh greens or meats. Wheat, olives, and grapes were common at the table.  
[READ ACTS 27:6 and 27:37-38]. Malnutrition was pervasive.
- ❖ A poor family’s staple was bread served with soup made with cabbage and spoiled vegetables. Porridge was also common. Rare treats would have included cheese and pork.
  - Bread would be the main course, especially for the poor.
  - Watered-down wine was served at every meal to all ages.



It's 56 A.D.

### **Imagine that you are a Jew living in Rome**

You have just returned home to Rome after being evicted six years ago.

Things are still a mess for you: your old Jewish friends are mostly gone, your tenement slum is no better than it was, and Rome itself is swelling with newcomers.

- ❖ Only @4% of the city is Jewish.
- ❖ The handful of Jewish synagogues in Rome were classified as “universities” to avoid the Roman religious laws which banned secret societies.
- ❖ Roman citizens scorned Jews because they were stereotyped as obnoxious, dirty, and poor.
- ❖ You are allowed to observe your Sabbath and religious festivals and to gather freely.
- ❖ You probably assume that any Holy Scripture reference to “evil” is directed toward gentiles only. After all, you are of Abraham’s spirit, if not blood.

- ❖ You send money regularly to Jerusalem for aiding the Temple.  
You're not alone in doing so: **[READ ROMANS 15:23-26]**
- ❖ No compulsory military duty.
- ❖ You very much feel like a minority:
  - Forced to wear distinct clothing and scorned by society for your poverty.
- ❖ You speak mostly Greek, even amongst other Jews.
  - Your children all have Greek names.
  - Marriage is for convenience, and for producing heirs.
  - According to the scriptures, parents are not to play or laugh with their children, nor are they to spoil them. (Ecclus. 30:9-13)



**Imagine that you are a Christian<sup>5</sup> living in Rome**

- ❖ You do not have a Bible as we know it today. Your only solid text was most of what we now call the Old Testament.<sup>6</sup> ---and there was no "New" Testament yet, not even any gospels. Your knowledge of Jesus as God's Son comes via word of mouth only, though it's said that a Christ follower named Paul had written a few letters to fellow believers elsewhere. (Paul's Letter to the Romans had not yet arrived; it was most likely penned sometime between the spring of 56 and 57 A.D.)
- ❖ "The most important text for understanding the attitude toward Rome of early Hellenistic Christianity is Romans 13:1-7."<sup>7</sup> **[READ ROMANS 13:1-7]**  
Here Paul is reflecting the common early Christian attitude of loyalty, and that the political authorities are a part of God's plan and order.
- ❖ "Bread and Circuses" (made famous by the historian/poet Juvenal)  
Ever since Julius Caesar's time the people of Rome had received free bread,

<sup>5</sup> "Christian" was not yet a term; instead, you would have been a "Christ follower."

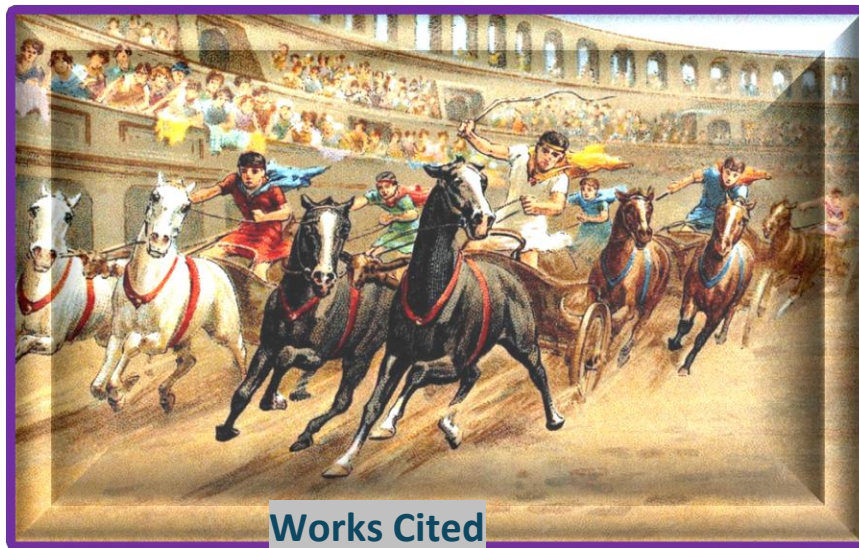
<sup>6</sup> The authentication of the Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, and Ezekiel remained in dispute for another few decades.

<sup>7</sup> Interpreter's, Supplementary Vol., pg. 757.

compliments of the government.<sup>8</sup> It was a way to insure loyalty to the State. Christians were not allowed to be Roman citizens and were probably left out of this dole.

- ❖ Few early Christians anywhere (Rome, Jerusalem, etc.) joined the radical Zealots. Instead of violence, these followers of Christ sought the Kingdom via patience and tolerance.
- ❖ Some Christians sold themselves into slavery to aid their fellow believers. This happened quite often. The Apostle Paul even mentions it in his letter to the believers in Corinth, which he wrote shortly before our story.

[READ 1 CORINTHIANS 7:21-24].



### Works Cited

- *Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, NIV*. AMG Publishers, Chattanooga, TN, 1996.
- *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, volumes noted above., ed. by George A. Buttrick. Abington Press, Nashville, 1962.
- Lohse, Eduard, *The Formation of the New Testament*. Abington Press, Nashville, 1981.
- "Religious Tolerance and Persecution in the Roman Empire," (online). A paper from the Constitutional Rights Foundation, Fall 1997.
- "Slavery," in an online paper *Rome Exposed—Roman Life*, by Sumair Mirza, 1999. (<http://www.classicsunveiled.com/rome/html/slavery.html>).
- "What Does 'Bread and Circuses!' Mean? " in the series "Ancient Rome and the Ancient World." April 2, 2024. (<https://medium.com>)
- Witherington, Ben III, *A Week in the Life of Corinth*. InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill, 2012.

---

<sup>8</sup> Rome had about 250 bakeries which baked three kinds of bread daily: black bread (*panis plebeius*) for the poor; low-quality white bread; and high quality white bread for Roman nobility. Only the black bread was free.