

## DOCTRINE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

### Introduction

Rome and her empire have meant many things to many people.

To Constantine (306-377) it meant a restoration of greatness and a creation of a new Rome on the Bosphorus.

To Charlemagne (769-814) it meant establishment of a Holy Roman Empire in the image of the first Rome.

To Innocent III (1178-80), other popes and faithful Catholics through the ages the term has become synonymous with the mother church.

To many contemporary students of prophecy, the Roman Empire is an object of speculation: when and how will it be restored?

To most Romans of the 1st and 2nd century A.D. it was "the world," and the Mediterranean *Mare Nostrum*, our sea.

To the apostle Paul the empire meant a place to preach and to suffer; its citizenship meant protection from undue harassment and Rome a place to seek legal vindication, and eventually to die.

For early Christians the empire was not only home but a persecutor for belief in Christ.

### Early Development

Rome was strategically placed to dominate the Italian peninsula and Italy. It was also strategically located to dominate the Mediterranean world. The Mediterranean is surrounded by a rim of deserts and mountains and other natural barriers.

This topography made possible the unification of the land around the sea by various political powers. In a very real sense Roman history began with the entrance of several Italic tribes into the peninsula from the north between 1000 and 750 B.C. These peoples intermarried with the Mediterranean and Indo-European peoples already in the land, and began settlements on the seven hills of Rome.

Earliest settlements in the area of Rome were located on the Palatine Hill, where the Caesars later built their palaces. The ruins of these early palaces date back to 900 B.C. Visitors to Rome often visit the remnants of these excavated villages. About 800 B.C. Etruscan peoples moved into west and northwest Italy, apparently from the Near East. The early Etruscans settled in what is today known as Tuscany. These people made numerous contributions to Roman civilization, not the least of which was urbanization of the city of Rome.

The great Etruscan period at Rome occurred during the 6th century B.C. The Etruscans came from Etruria, an ancient country in central Italy coextensive with modern Tuscany but originally called Umbria. During the 8th century B.C. Greek migrations began to hit the Italian mainland and continued for a couple of centuries. They located primarily in southwest Italy and Sicily.

Gauls or Celts moved into the Po Valley in the north of Italy at the end of the 6th century B.C. and posed a threat to the Romans for some three centuries thereafter. The Po Valley extends for some 405 miles following the Po River. The river begins in northern Italy flowing from the slopes of Mt. Viso just southwest of the Alps until it reaches the Adriatic Sea.

During her early centuries Rome was occupied by Latins (one of the Italic tribes) and the Etruscans, who apparently dominated Rome after c. 600 B.C. Kings ruled during these early years, assisted by their councils of nobles. Then, as the traditional view has it, around 500 B.C. the Latins successfully revolted against the Etruscans and set up a republic, ruled by consuls, a senate and an assembly.

The tendency now is to hold that the change from monarchy to republic was more evolutionary and required a considerable period of time. At any rate, Rome found herself almost incessantly at war with a variety of powers for hundreds of years.

There was nothing much planned about this struggle that eventually brought her control of the peninsula and thus the western basin of the Mediterranean. Every time she conquered a new tribe or city-state she faced new enemies; she never felt safe or secure until she reached natural boundaries of the sea or the Alps and had finally reduced the Carthaginians, her powerful opponents in the north of Africa. Even then her fears and insecurity and the insatiable greed of her ruling classes continued to drive her on until the entire Mediterranean world had been secured.

As already noted, Rome's first struggle was with the Etruscans. First wresting control of Rome from these people, the Latins of the city were forced to war upon them intermittently for about 200 years. During the early days of the Etruscan conflict, Romans were aided by a league of Latin towns. But ultimately these people felt that Rome was merely using them for her own advantage and rebelled against Roman leadership. In the ensuing struggle the Romans were successful and absorbed the territory of Latium into the Roman state. Now Rome had new borders and became embroiled in struggles with neighboring Italic tribes. Meanwhile a new threat blew in from the north. Gauls descended from the Po Valley on the largely defenseless city in 390 B.C. The Romans ultimately got rid of them by paying a ransom. But the Gauls made an indelible impression, first by destroying all early records of the city and with them a factual knowledge of much of early Roman history, and second by instilling a fear and insecurity that would affect Roman affairs for a long time.

During the 4th century Rome overcame one after another of the Italic tribes of the peninsula. By the end of the century most of the peninsula was hers except the toe, heel and instep of the boot of Italy.

In the process she had virtually brought to an end the Etruscan and Italian threats. Then as she sought to protect Italian allies in the south, Rome became embroiled in war with the Greeks of southern Italy early in the 3rd century B.C. The struggle was fierce, especially because troops from Epirus (a region in north western Greece bordering on Ionian Sea) came in to help their Greek compatriots.

By 265 B.C. the Romans had taken control of the entire peninsula and had shut up the Gauls in the Po Valley. Rome organized this territory in a threefold way. Some towns had full Roman citizenship and rights. Others were known as Latin allies and had lesser privileges. The vast majority, however, were Italian allies and had no special benefits except the Roman peace imposed on the peninsula, with the degree of prosperity and security which Roman control brought. All these peoples were confederated with Rome by a treaty relationship.

### **Conquest of the Mediterranean World**

Hardly had Rome united the peninsula when she became involved in a series of wars (the Punic Wars) with the Carthaginians. As Rome's power grew she came increasingly into conflict or competition with these prosperous Phoenician peoples centered in modern Tunisia.

The immediate issue before them was who would control Sicily--at that time a rich agricultural region. This question was of great significance for Rome because Sicily was within shouting distance of the Italian coast, though today the straits are a little wider. During the first war with Carthage (264-241 B.C.), Rome took Sicily, developed a first-rate navy and became the dominant naval power in the western Mediterranean. Subsequently she took Sardinia and Corsica and pushed her boundaries in the north to the Alps, thereby erasing the Gallic threat.

The second war with Carthage (218-202 B.C.) was essentially a land war. Hannibal marched from Spain, through southern France and over the Alps into Italy. His war elephants helped to terrorize his opponents. Hannibal counted heavily on a revolution of the Gauls and numerous Italian cities to bring Rome to her knees. Many Gauls and Italians did join his armies, and numerous Italian towns did rise in rebellion; but somehow the Romans managed to fight on, subduing the rebellious towns one by one. Ultimately Rome won the war by invading the Carthaginian homeland and decisively defeating her enemy there. She now annexed Spain and a piece of France. Much later (149-146 B.C.), Rome fought a third war with Carthage, destroyed the city and Phoenician power in the west, and annexed Carthaginian territory in North Africa.

Rome was now on the way to fulfilling her dream of being lord and master over what she could now consider a Roman lake—the Mediterranean Sea as it would later be called. At this time it was known as *Mare Internum*—The Great Sea.



Meanwhile Rome had been forced to turn her attention to the eastern Mediterranean. Macedonia had allied with Hannibal during the second Carthaginian war and Rome had neutralized the threat by making alliances with other Greeks who then engaged the Macedonians. But she was also faced with the possible destruction of balance of power in the east. Let me summarize how this happened. After Alexander the Great died in 323 B.C., his empire broke up and ultimately fell into three major divisions.

The three were: Macedonia, Seleucia (including initially Syria, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and other territories), and Egypt. As long as a balance of power was maintained between these empires, Rome was safe. Should that balance of power be upset, one eastern nation might become strong enough to defeat Rome. It should be remembered that the eastern Mediterranean was more wealthy and more populous than the western Mediterranean.

Just before 200 B.C. a boy king ascended the throne of Egypt. Seeking to take advantage of the situation, Seleucia and Macedonia attacked Egypt. Egypt appealed to Rome. Rome felt obliged to intervene to restore the balance of power and settle accounts with Macedonia. A series of wars ensued; these finally ended when in 146 B.C. Rome destroyed the venerable city of Corinth in an effort to cow the Greeks, who periodically had risen against Roman power. Rome annexed all of Greece, but allowed other eastern Mediterranean powers to remain independent as long as they were allied to Rome. A few years later (133 B.C.) the king of Pergamum willed his kingdom to Rome and it came into the empire as the province of Asia. Encompassing the western third of Asia Minor, it constituted the brightest jewel in the imperial crown.

## **Demise of the Republic**

As is clearly evident, Rome had been involved in prolonged warfare, during which time she used her allies without properly sharing the booty of war with them. As a result of imperial acquisitions, numerous problems arose. The senatorial class and republican institutions proved incapable of handling the increasing emergencies. A series of revolutions broke out which gradually destroyed the republic. One of the most important involved an Italian revolt (90-88 B.C.) during which most of the peninsula rose against Roman domination. Rome was forced to grant full citizenship to all free Italians in order to quell the uprising. The activities of Marius, Sulla, Pompey, Julius Caesar, Crassus, Mark Antony and others cannot be commented on in detail here. But select activities require attention if one is to gain some idea of Roman development.

Pompey was granted emergency powers to exterminate the pirate threat to Roman shipping by Mithradates. As a by-product of that campaign, he took several eastern provinces in 64-63 B.C., including Syria and Palestine. Subsequently (in 60 B.C.), Pompey, Julius Caesar and Crassus organized a triumvirate. By pooling their political support they sought to gain certain personal concessions. The most important was the grant of an army to Caesar to conquer Gaul. The triumvirate was renewed in 55 B.C., but it gradually disintegrated in the heat of personal ambition.

The civil war with which it ended left Julius Caesar ruler of the empire in 48 B.C., when he defeated Pompey at Pharsalus in Greece. Granted dictatorship, Caesar set about with great vigor and ability to restore order and prosperity to the Roman state, governing it as an empire. Not the least of his reforms was the Julian calendar, which remained in effect for several centuries. Unfortunately Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C. by men distraught over demise of the republic. But they did not realize it was impossible to restore the old political institutions.

Octavius, Caesar's adopted heir, Mark Antony and Lepidus in 44 B.C. had themselves appointed by the Senate to rule the state and in 42 B.C. destroyed the republican forces led by Brutus and Cassius. Soon Octavius and Antony pushed Lepidus into the background and began to square off for the ultimate struggle between them. Antony and his forces were defeated at a naval battle at Actium in western Greece in 31 B.C. Octavius pursued the fleeing Antony and Cleopatra to Egypt, where they both subsequently committed suicide; Egypt came into the empire in 30 B.C.

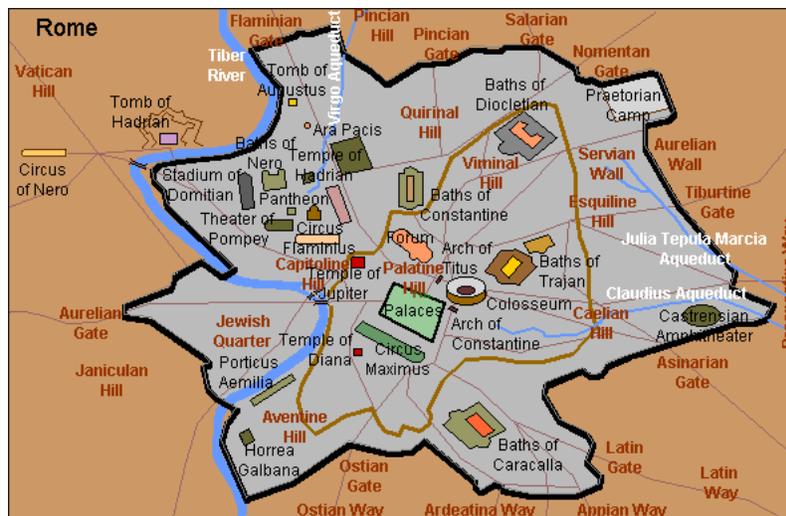
Now Octavius was free to restore the empire, which by this time was in a very disheveled condition. Wracked by civil war for decades, the Mediterranean world suffered severe economic dislocation and some provinces tottered on the brink of bankruptcy. Political and social needs long unattended in the midst of military activity and political uncertainty now received needed attention. Octavius became Caesar Augustus and he brought peace to the empire. It became known as Pax Romanus and so peace reigned without interruption for some two centuries.

## The Biblical Caesars

**Augustus**, after restoring order, appeared before the Senate in 28 B.C. where he reinstated a form of republican government. But they were neither able nor willing to reassume the full burden of administering the empire. So they conferred upon him the title of Imperator Caesar August and thus he became both ruler and chief priest with numerous powers. Of special importance in this arrangement with the Senate was his role as commander-in-chief of all armed forces. A grateful populace revered him greatly, and some (especially in the East) actually worshipped the cult of the divine Augustus. Thus emperor worship was born. But during his reign, so was the Prince of Peace born in Bethlehem, where Joseph and Mary reported for a census-taking ordered by Augustus as part of his effort to tidy up the Empire.

Augustus (27 B.C.-A.D. 14) was succeeded by his adopted heir, Tiberius. In adopting his heir before his death and associating him with himself, Augustus guaranteed a regular and peaceful succession and set a precedent that was to characterize subsequent imperial administrations.

**Tiberius** (A.D. 14-37) is especially significant for the New Testament student because Christ was crucified during his reign. He also appointed Pontius Pilate procurator of Judea (A.D. 26-36). Tiberius was also the first Emperor to turn over the administration of the city of Rome to the Palace Guard. Rome had become a large city in need of constant administration.



**Caligula** (A.D. 37-41), grandson of Augustus' daughter Julia, next occupied the imperial chair. As a result of a serious illness he seems to have become mentally deranged. Among his wilder projects was the erection of a temple to himself out of public funds and appointment of his favorite horse as high priest of the cult. In order to obtain needed funds, he restored to new taxes and confiscations, and used treason laws as a means of seizing money and property. Caligula had alienated not only the Romans but Jews as well. Their monotheistic beliefs prevented them from worshiping images of the Caesars, and his statues were forcibly erected in the synagogues in Alexandria Egypt.

Before the order to set up his statue in the temple in Jerusalem could be carried out, news of the emperor's death arrived. The Praetorian or Palace Guard elevated Caligula's uncle, **Claudius** (A.D. 41-54) to the imperial office. The Senate had no choice but to rubber stamp the action. Claudius seems to have provided a high quality of administration for the empire. He adjusted tax burdens and inaugurated an extensive program of public works. This involved building new aqueducts, roads and canals, and especially the development of Ostia as a harbor for Rome. For some decades, however, Puteoli (modern Pozzuoli), near Naples, was to remain the chief port of the capital. Claudius also added Britain and Thrace to the empire and extended Roman citizenship in the provinces.

Claudius' activities crossed paths with the New Testament narrative on at least two occasions. He permitted Judea a brief experience as a client kingdom under Herod Agrippa I (A.D. 41-44) and then restored it to its position as an imperial province under the rule of procurators. Pursuant to some trouble with Jews in Rome, he expelled them all from the capital (Acts 18:2; the historian Suetonius confirms this action). Claudius adopted as his son and successor Nero, son of his second wife by a previous marriage. Nero (A.D. 54-68) ruled well during his first five years, when he was under the domination of his mother and capable heads of the executive departments of government, chief of whom was the Stoic philosopher Seneca.

When **Nero** became his own man, he came increasingly into conflict with various individuals and factions in the government. As he did he became fearful of plots against his life, and his rule took on aspects of a reign of terror. Ultimately he disposed of his mother, his wife and his stepbrother.

One hot July night in 64, fire broke out in Rome in the slums east of the Circus Maximus and burned with unabated force for nine days, gutting more than half the city. No effort to check it succeeded. Even Nero's palace lay a charred mass. In spite of the emperor's measures to alleviate the sufferings of the homeless, he could not allay the people's suspicion that he had started the fire in order to have the glory of rebuilding Rome along grander lines. To divert criticism from himself, he laid blame for the fire on Christians of the city and initiated the first official persecution of them. This began in the latter part of 64 and lasted until 66; it was restricted to Rome because those elsewhere could hardly have had a part in the catastrophe. Paul was apparently martyred in Rome during this persecution. Nero ultimately managed to alienate important segments of society in Rome and Italy and the empire. Of special importance was his failure to hold allegiance of the military, who launched a successful rebellion in 68. Nero committed suicide, and with him died the Julio-Claudian line. Interestingly, the death of Nero coincided with his decision to have Paul beheaded.

The years 68 and 69 are known as the Years of the three Emperors, **Galba**, **Otho** and **Vitellius**. Each followed in rapid succession. Finally **Vespasian**, commander of the armies of the east, won undisputed control of the empire and ruled 69-79. Vespasian could have followed the path of military dictatorship or cooperation with civilian administrators.

He chose the latter and became a kind of second Augustus, dividing rule of Rome and the empire with the Senate. Vespasian faced a herculean task in lifting the empire from its disheveled state. But he was equal to the emergency. He put down rebellions, reformed the army, built extensive fortifications, restored the economy, and built numerous public buildings in the capital. His most famous structure, which he was not able to finish, was the great Colosseum, built on the site of one of the lakes on the grounds of Nero's palace.

The most significant of Vespasian's activities for the Bible student was his suppression of the Jewish revolt. This rebellion had broken out in 66, and Vespasian had reduced all of Judea but Jerusalem by the time he made his bid for the imperial chair in 69. His son Titus assumed command of the armies that finally destroyed the city and the temple in A.D. 70. To commemorate this victory, Titus erected a triumphal arch adjacent to the Forum in Rome.

Titus ruled the empire briefly during the years 79-81. He completed the Colosseum and delighted the populace with a festival of 100 days' duration on that occasion. Obviously the structure did not exist during the Neronian persecution and had nothing to do with Paul's execution. Moreover, there is no firm evidence that it was ever used for martyrdom of Christians. The short reign of Titus was saddened by the eruption of Vesuvius and the consequent burial of Pompeii and nearby cities, and by another great fire which roared through the capital for three days.

Titus was succeeded by his younger brother Domitian (81-96), who was received without opposition by the Praetorian Guard and the Senate. Very soon he won the undying hostility of the Senate by his autocratic ways, which indicated his intention of absolute dictatorship. After 86, he required officials of his house-hold to address him as "Lord and God." A persecution of Jews broke out in the empire about A.D. 90 and soon engulfed Christians. The apostle John was exiled to the Isle of Patmos at this time.

But Domitian cannot be dismissed as a mere tyrant. In Rome he was an able administrator and built extensively in an effort to erase the scars left by the great fire of 80. He ruled the empire well, and it prospered under his administration. But ultimately no one felt safe from his suspicion and purges. His own wife, believing she was to be the next victim, launched a conspiracy that resulted in his assassination on September 16, A.D. 96.

At the end of the first Christian century, the apostle John was freed to return to his beloved Ephesus where he probably finished writing the book of the Revelation and died a natural death.