

Doctrine of the Bible's Caesars and the Praetorian Guard

The Demise of the Republic

For some 200 years Rome had been involved in prolonged warfare, during which time she failed to share her booty of war with her allies. As a result 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 if one is to gain some idea of Roman development, the intrigues and activities of these men should be studied. Perhaps the best place to start in our attempt to chronicle the demise of the once great republic would be the middle of the 1st century B.C.

A Roman Senator and Consul by the name of Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus was granted emergency powers to exterminate a pirate threat to Roman shipping by Mithradates. Pompey was known for his military prowess and thus the name Pompey the Great. 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 to give Caesar command of an army to conquer Gaul. The triumvirate was renewed in 55 B.C., but it gradually disintegrated in the heat of personal ambition. A civil war ensued.

Julius Caesar became ruler of the empire in 48 B.C., when he defeated Pompey at Pharsalus in Greece. Assuming the role of dictator, Caesar set about with great vigor to successfully restore order and prosperity to the Roman state. Unfortunately Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C. by men distraught over the demise of the republic. But they shortly found out they could not restore the old political institutions.

The Second Triumvirate

Octavius, Caesar's adopted heir, Mark Antony and Lepidus in 44 B.C. had themselves appointed by the Senate to rule the state. They soon destroyed the republican forces led by Brutus and Cassius. Octavius and Antony pushed Lepidus into the background and the two triumvirate survivors squared off for an inexorable struggle. 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 his paramour, Cleopatra to Egypt, where the two lover committed suicide.

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.

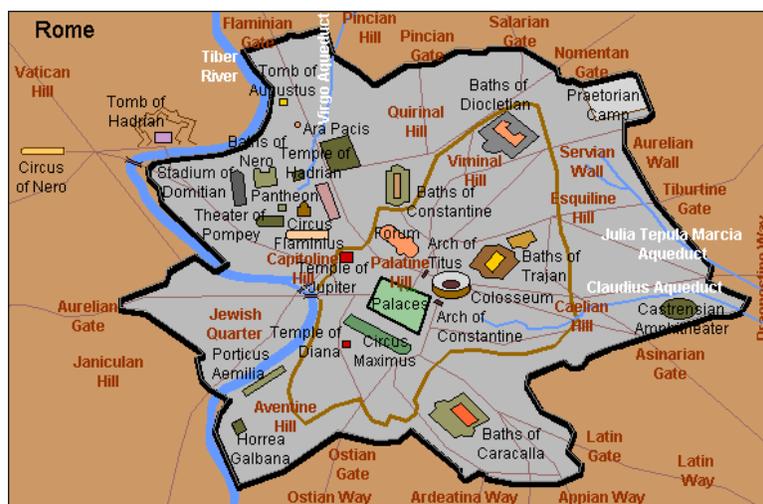
Political and social needs long unattended in the midst of military activity and political uncertainty now received needed attention. Octavius became Caesar Augustus and he brought peace to the empire. It became known as Pax Romanus and so peace reigned without interruption for some two centuries. Now let's concentrate on the biblical Caesars.

The Biblical Caesars

Augustus, after restoring order, appeared before the Senate in 28 B.C. where he reinstated a form of republican government. But the Senate was 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 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 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. The guard ensured law and order and loyalty to Caesar.



Caligula (A.D. 37-41), grandson of Augustus's 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 new taxes and confiscations, and used treason as a means of seizing money and property. Caligula alienated not only the Romans but Jews as well. Their monotheistic beliefs prevented them from worshiping images of the Caesars. His answer to their indiscretion was the forcible erection of his statues in various synagogues in Alexandria Egypt. Before the order to set up statuary in the temple at Jerusalem he suffered an untimely death. Most historians believe his death was by execution at the hands of the Praetorian Guard.

Claudius (A.D. 41-54), was elevated to the imperial office by the Praetorian or Palace Guard. The action by this crack military unit would set a precedent which would last for many years. The Senate had no choice but to rubber stamp the selection. 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 several 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's 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, a progeny 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 paranoia and a reign of terror ensued. 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 was 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 a grander Rome. 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 the empire.

Of special importance was his failure to hold allegiance of the Praetorian Guard, 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. Paul, it would seem, had become a favorite of the Guard.

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.

Vespasian (69-79) 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 broke out in 66, and Vespasian reduced all of Judea beside 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 (79-81) ruled the empire briefly as a military hero. 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.

Domitian (81-96), was received without opposition by the Praetorian Guard and the Senate, but very soon won the undying hostility of the Senate. His autocratic ways, revealed his intention of absolute dictatorship. After 86, he required officials of his house-hold to address him as "Lord and God." In about A.D. 90 a persecution of Jews broke out in the empire. 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 in an effort to erase the scars left by the great fire of 80, he implemented an extensive building program. 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 finished writing the book of the Revelation and died a natural death. It has been concluded that the Praetorian was instrumental in the selection of all of the biblical Caesar's, some to a greater extent than others. Let's see what we can learn from our *Doctrine of the Praetorian Guard*.

Doctrine of the Praetorian Guard

History of the Guard

The Guard was established in 212 B.C. by Scipio Africanus to act as a crack body guard for himself. The Guard grew to some 10,000; they were originally located in units of 1000 among ten major cities in central Italy. They served as an internal police force providing protection for Rome and her surrounding city-states. The head of the guard became known as the prefect and his power was great as you might imagine.

During the reign of Tiberius a prefect by the name of Sejanus moved all 10,000 guardsmen to Rome. Their power grew and when Tiberius lost interest in being emperor he moved to the Isle of Capri and Sejanus took charge of the affairs of the empire. The Senate became a captive of their very protector. Sejanus later became too indiscreet in his lust for power so Tiberius had him assassinated.

Tiberius remained on the island showing little interest in matters of state; at the death of Tiberius the new prefect Macro proclaimed Caligula Caesar in A.D. 37. This established a precedent which would continue for some time. In A.D. 41 Caligula was assassinated by the guard and the unlikely Claudius was placed on the throne. The wise Claudius gave the guard a large stipend to ensure their loyalty. This would prove to be the future means of controlling them. At the death (probably poisoned by Agrippina) of Claudius, the prefect Burrus appointed the infamous Nero as emperor. The "nut" Nero would rule from 54 to 68 A.D. Nero in 68 made the fatal error of having Paul executed which many have conjectured was a prime factor motivating his execution.

The power of the Praetorian had become immense. It would take a large army to undermine the military presence massed in Rome; most of Rome's large armies were in the hinterlands fighting the "barbarians." I have provided a map of Rome which shows the Praetorian Camp at the north east edge of the city. The guard having been moved to Rome by Tiberius was at first stationed at various points in the city however, the Emperor soon decided the unit needed its own fortified camp-site. The Camp was laid out in the same way as a Roman camp in the field. It was always the strongest military unit in the city.

Paul was a missionary to the guard during his Roman imprisonment. He was often in their presence. These select troops were assigned to guard the great apostle. This familiarity with his guards perhaps accounts for Paul's many military metaphors used in the four prison epistles, i.e., Philemon, Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians. Paul from all indication was very popular with his guards. Paul's relationship with the guard in the palace had apparently given others confidence to teach the Word.

KJV

Phi 1:12 But I would ye should understand, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel;

Phi 1:13 So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the palace, and in all other places;

Phi 1:14 And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

When Praetorian is properly anglicized, the word is spelled “Praitorian,” however, in most English dictionaries we find “Praetorian.” In Philippians 1:13 the word is translated in the KJV “palace,” in the NIV “palace guard” and in the RV “praetorian guard.”

NIV

Phi 1:13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole **palace guard** and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

Strong’s dictionary has written of Praitorian:

“The word is of foreign origin.

Definition: the Praitorian or governor's courtroom (sometimes included the whole edifice and camp to include the quarters of the guard).

“The Praitorian signified originally a general's (Praetor's) tent. Then it was applied to the council of army officers; then to the official residence of the governor of a province and finally, to the imperial body guard.”

In the Greek of the New Testament the word “Praitorian” appears six times.

Mat 27:27 Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the **common hall** (Praitorian) and gathered unto him the whole band of soldiers.

Mar 15:16 And the soldiers led him away into the **hall**, called Praetorium (Praitorian); and they call together the whole band.

Joh 18:28 Then led they Jesus from Caiaphas unto the **hall of judgment** (Praitorian): and it was early; and they themselves went not into the **judgment hall** (Praitorian), lest they should be defiled; but that they might eat the Passover.

Joh 18:33 Then Pilate entered into the **judgment hall** (Praitorian) again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews?

Phi 1:13 So that my bonds in Christ are manifest in all the **palace** (Praitorian), and to all the rest;

It would seem “those who belong to Caesar’s household” in Phi 4:22 refer to the many believers among the guard and the various civilians working at the palace.

The map of Rome shows the palace located on Palatine Hill just northeast of Circus Maximus. It could just as easily be labeled the Praetorium.

In the Gospels, the term denotes the official residence in Jerusalem of the Roman governor, the various translations are apparently an attempt to indicate the special purpose for which that residence was used. Whatever building the governor occupied was the Praetorium. It is most probable that in Jerusalem he resided in the well-known palace of Herod. Pilate's residence has been identified with the castle of Antonia, which was occupied by a regular garrison. It therefore qualified as a Praetorium as did Herod's palace.

