

## Theology on Tap – The Roman Empire

Most of us probably know many things about the history, culture and legacy of the Roman Empire. This session is primarily focused on understanding some of the things about the Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century that are important to reading and understanding the New Testament.

**Who were the “Romans”?** Obviously, the center was in Rome (one of the few easily identifiable places in the NT!) However, by the first century, the Roman Empire was massive. It was ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse, and especially because of trade, people traveled extensively. Many “Romans” put down roots in places far from where they were born. Moreover, anybody could be a “citizen” of the Roman Empire, including Paul (cf. Acts 22:25-29)



**Rome, Inc.** – popular movies portray the military aspects of the Roman Empire, but the primary purpose of the military was to expand the market and keep the trade routes open. Most Roman provinces were run by civilian (often puppet) governments, rather than direct martial law. This was the way it was in Judea at the time of Jesus’ birth. However, around 15 AD, Judea was placed under direct military rule, with a Roman military governor, because of difficulties in maintaining order and trade.)

**Language and literacy** – Because of the Dark Ages, modern people in the West often assume that widespread literacy is a modern thing (and also in the US, we usually think only highly educated people can speak more than one language.) However, while everybody didn’t read and write in the first century, there’s evidence that a large number of regular people could read and write (otherwise, there’s no rationale for the sign on the Cross being in three languages – cf. John 19:19-20; also the Rosetta Stone); also synagogues are premised on the idea that regular people can read. Prior to the Roman conquest, most of these lands had been previously part of the Empire of Alexander the Great. Therefore, Greek had become the international language, which many people spoke in addition to their native language. This is why the entire NT is written in Greek, even when documents are written by and for Jews.

**Slavery in the Roman Empire** – Slavery in the Graeco-Roman world was cruel and dehumanizing, as slavery always is. Slaves could simply be executed on a whim, and when slaves revolted there could be mass executions (after Spartacus’ slave revolt of 73 BC, 6000 slaves were crucified, lining the road to Rome.) However, especially for American readers of the NT, it’s important to understand differences between American slavery and slavery in the Roman Empire. There are four major things to know:

- Slavery was not racial or class-based – anybody could end up a slave, usually by losing a war (or rebellion) or by owing a debt.
- While many slaves were simply used as cannon fodder, many were highly skilled and educated, and kept as slaves for that very reason (this is important in understanding the upcoming parable of the talents...)
- Slavery could be for life, but it was NOT hereditary – if you were a slave, everything you “owned” became the property of your master. However,

once your children (or at least your sons) reached legal age, they were automatically free.

- If you managed to obtain your freedom (usually by buying your way out), there was no necessary social stigma attached to having been a slave. At the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it's estimated that nearly a third of Roman Senators had been slaves at one point.

Thus, slavery as practiced in the western hemisphere was brutal and extreme even by Roman standards! Although a minority voice in early American history, there were a number of Christians and Christian groups who recognized this. And they also realized that while the NT writers accept the reality of slavery, slavery is never lifted up in the NT as a good thing.

**Empire as a political reality** – As most of us have just voted, or are about to vote, it's important to remember that while there were early forms of democracy in the ancient Greek world, by the time of the NT, the Roman Empire absolutely controlled the world people knew, and they saw two alternatives: somehow try to get along with the empire, or be crushed. To be sure, there are voices in the NT (particularly apocalyptic voices) that call Christians to be willing to accept being crushed in some situations. But the idea that average citizens can “petition the government for redress” is an unknown concept.

Rather, the NT frequently lifts up the idea that rulers are accountable to God, and that they are responsible for governing in ways that are fair and just. It's important for us, who don't live in an Empire system, to see ourselves not only as the “people”, but also as the “rulers” who by our participation and voting decide how governing is done and what constitutes “fair” and “just”. In a democratic society, this is the “hermeneutical imperative” for us!