

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #135:

THE CHURCH OF ROME: A HISTORY

By John Temples

Have you ever considered the fact that for essentially all of the church's existence--from AD 33 until now, almost 2,000 years--it has had to deal with *Rome* in one form or another? Note:

- Israel in the first century was part of the Roman Empire, and had been since 63 BC.
- Jesus lived His entire earthly life within the borders of the Roman Empire.
- The church was born in the Roman Empire.
- The Bible was completed entirely within the borders of the Roman Empire.
- All the apostles died under the Roman Empire, several at the hands of Roman authorities.
- During the next three centuries, an apostate church arose in Rome which became so strong that the true church was swallowed up and forced into hiding (symbolized by a pure woman being forced to flee into the wilderness, Revelation 12).
- The Roman Empire is the only world empire to have died and to come back to life in another form (political Rome became ecclesiastical Rome).
- The influence of the Roman Empire was so powerful that its effects are still seen today in many areas, such as language, laws, and feats of engineering such as aqueducts and roads.

Every Bible student would profit from a study of Rome and its impact on Christianity and the church.

THE CITY OF ROME: EARLY HISTORY AND ORIGINS

“Rome began as an Iron Age hut village, founded in the mid-8th century BC. In 616, the Romans' sophisticated Etruscan neighbours seized power, but were ousted in 509, the inception of the Roman Republic. It conquered most of the rest of Italy, then turned its attentions overseas, and by the 1st century BC, ruled Spain, North Africa and Greece.” (<https://www.rome.info/ancient/history/>)

As to the origin of the name Rome, Roman mythology and history states that the name comes from its founder Romulus. There are other theories put forth by historians and archeologists as to where Rome got its name. It may have come from the Etruscan word for the Tiber River, "rumon."

More information comes from www.rome.com: "[31 BC - AD 476] was Rome's heyday, and by AD 117 the Roman Empire had expanded across three continents, covering Asia Minor and northern Africa and taking in most of Europe. In AD 286, the Roman Empire was divided into two with the eastern and western empires being ruled independently. This was the start of a period of decline and AD 476 saw the end of the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire, ruled from its capital, Constantinople (present-day Istanbul) was not captured until the 15th century."

ISRAEL AND THE ROMAN EMPIRE

According to Wikipedia, the Roman general Pompey in his eastern campaign established Roman Syria in 64 BC and conquered Jerusalem shortly after in 63 BC. Some 20 years later, under Julius Caesar, Judaism was officially recognised as a legal religion, and Judea, Samaria and Idumea (biblical Edom) became the Roman province of Iudaea. Jewish/Roman tensions resulted in several wars, which resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple in AD 70. Israel was subject to Roman rule from 63 BC until Rome fell in AD 476, a period of over 500 years.

Jesus lived and died under the Roman Empire, the Jewish leaders being successful in enlisting Roman authorities to put Him to death. A Roman detail of soldiers guarded His tomb, but could not keep Him from rising from the dead. After the establishment of the church in Jerusalem in AD 33, wicked Jewish leaders tried to use Roman laws to eliminate Christianity, but were unsuccessful. Christianity came to Rome and eventually replaced paganism as the "official" religion of Rome.

THE CHURCH AT ROME

When you think of the church at Rome, probably the first thing that comes to mind is Paul's letter to the Romans (the Roman church), written AD 56 or 57. When he

wrote Romans, the church had already been there for some time. Based on references in the book of Acts, scholars believe that the Roman church was established by at least the AD 40 decade. And it's possible that the church was started in Rome even earlier than that. Acts 2:10 says there were Jews from Rome present at Pentecost, AD 33.

We also learn from the Roman letter that not only did Paul not establish the church at Rome, he had not even visited the city at the time of writing. In Romans 1:10, Paul prays that God would allow him to go to Rome. He says, "I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles....So as much as is in me, I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also" (Romans 1:13, 15). Paul's desire to visit Rome implies that the Roman church was already showing signs of the prominence it would have in future centuries.

So what was the state of the Roman church in the middle of the first century? At the time Paul wrote Romans (about AD 57), it was a faithful church. Paul said to them, "Your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world" (Romans 1:8). In 16:19, he says, "Your obedience has become known to all." And Paul speaks of the mutual faith possessed by the Roman Christians and himself in 1:12. Even though Paul had never visited Rome, he knew a lot of people there, and chapter 16 is full of personal references and greetings. So there was not a hint of scandal in the Roman church in AD 57.

A few years after writing Romans, Paul arrived in Rome, but he came as a prisoner, not as a visiting preacher. Paul was imprisoned twice in Rome. The first imprisonment was about AD 60 to 62; that imprisonment resulted in his release. A few years later, he was held there a second time, and that imprisonment resulted in his death at the hands of Nero, in AD 67 or 68.

The first imprisonment is recorded in Acts 28, which describes Paul's arrival in Rome. Here is Acts 28:12-15: "And landing at Syracuse, we¹ stayed three days. From there we circled round and reached Rhegium. And after one day the south wind blew; and the next day we came to Puteoli, where we found brethren, and were invited to stay with them seven days. And so we went toward Rome. And from there, when the brethren heard about us, they came to meet us as far as

¹ The use of the pronoun "we" indicates that Luke, the author of Acts, accompanied Paul on the voyage to Rome.

Appii Forum and Three Inns. When Paul saw them, he thanked God and took courage.” This passage is significant, because it describes the Roman Christians as being excited to meet Paul, no doubt because he had written a letter to them a few years earlier.

The Acts account also tells us that Paul’s first imprisonment was not a strict one, but was more like “house arrest.” Acts 28:30-31 describes this period: “Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.”

No doubt, many members of the church at Rome were among “all who came to him.” Again, no hint of any problems with the Roman church--until you get to some of Paul’s letters written during this time.

OMINOUS REFERENCES TO THE ROMAN CHURCH IN THE EPISTLES

Paul wrote Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon during his first imprisonment in Rome. There are some subtle hints in these letters that the enthusiastic welcome the Roman Christians gave Paul on his arrival had turned sour. The reason is simple: jealousy over Paul’s prominence. He was having tremendous success preaching the gospel while under house arrest. There were converts in the palace guard and even in Caesar’s household (Philippians 1:12-13, 4:22). His zeal had encouraged many of the Roman Christians to become more evangelistic. Philippians 1:14 says, “And most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”

The operative word in that last verse is “most” (not all). Look at Philippians 1:12-16: “But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What

then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.”

So some brethren, likely among the Roman church leadership, were preaching Christ (no problem with their message), but were doing so out of envy; and were trying to create problems for Paul with the Roman authorities.

There are more subtle indications of this breach between Paul and the Roman church leadership. Look at Philippians 4, written from a Roman prison. Paul expresses thanks for the support and supplies he had received from the church at Philippi. Philippians 1:14 says, “You have done well that you shared in my distress.” Distress??? Where were the Roman Christians? Why did they not help? Why did Paul have to depend on the necessities of life being supplied by a church 4,600 miles away?

THE SECOND IMPRISONMENT, AD 67-68

Some five years after his first imprisonment, Paul found himself back in prison at Rome. He wrote 2 Timothy during that incarceration. In that epistle, the hostility between the Roman church leaders and Paul is even more evident.

In 2 Timothy 1:16, Paul thanks God for Onesiphorus, a Christian from Ephesus in Asia Minor, and a friend and helper of Paul. Paul pays tribute to him: “The Lord grant mercy to the household of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me, and was not ashamed of my chain; but when he arrived in Rome, he sought me out very zealously and found me. The Lord grant to him that he may find mercy from the Lord in that Day — and you know very well how many ways he ministered to me at Ephesus” (2 Timothy 1:16-17).

Again, the question is--in Paul’s distress, where were the Roman church members?

An even more poignant reference is 2 Timothy 4:9-13, where Paul pleads with Timothy to “Be diligent to come to me quickly; for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica — Crescens for Galatia, Titus for Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. And Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. Bring the

cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come — and the books, especially the parchments.” The silence of this passage regarding the Roman church is deafening. Evidently, they couldn’t even be bothered to bring Paul a cloak to keep him warm in prison, and none of them visited him anymore—he had become “toxic.”

One more text, 2 Timothy 4:16, is especially disheartening: “At my first defense, no one stood with me, but all forsook me. May it not be charged against them.” So by AD 67 the “divorce” between the Roman church leaders and Paul was complete. Here we see the beginnings of a spirit of envy and desire for power that have characterized the church in Rome for centuries.

ROME AS A CENTER OF CHRISTIANITY--BOTH REAL AND COUNTERFEIT

It’s fascinating to observe how the center of Christianity moved west over time. Of course, the hub of the church originally was Jerusalem, the church being established there in AD 33. It grew by leaps and bounds, and Jerusalem remained the “home base” of the apostles and the center of church activity for about three years. About AD 36, a great Jewish-led persecution arose and the church at Jerusalem was scattered (Acts 8:1).

A few years later, the gospel began to be preached to Gentiles; and by AD 47 or 48 the center of Christianity was no longer Jerusalem, but Antioch in Syria. It was at Antioch that members of the church received the divinely-given name “Christian” (Acts 11:26). It was from Antioch that the first formal missionaries were sent out (Acts 13:1-4).

Later, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, the Egyptian city of Alexandria became a significant (if not the most significant) center of Christianity. It was famous as a center of Biblical scholarship and learning. The Septuagint, a translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek, had been made there several centuries before. Several of the “church fathers” of the second century lived there, including Clement and Origen. Alexandria hosted one of the largest Jewish and Christian populations in the world in the second and third centuries.

Finally, with the development of Roman Catholicism in the third and fourth centuries, the center of Christianity shifted west once more, to Rome. However, by

this time, the true church had morphed into a counterfeit church, with an elaborate worship ritual structure and an organization patterned after the old political Roman Empire, complete with an earthly “head” of the church, the Roman pope. For twelve centuries, from the fall of the political Roman Empire in AD 476 to the French Revolution in the late 1700s, the church at Rome held vast ecclesiastical power. Several factors, including the invention of printing, the Protestant Reformation, and the military exploits of Napoleon, stripped the Roman popes of much of their power, but the Roman Catholic church still remains as the largest element of “Christendom.”

CONCLUSION

Rome today still wields political and religious influence over large numbers of people. A student of the Bible cannot overlook its importance and effect on Christianity throughout history. For further study on Rome’s place in the history of God’s people, please consult my commentary on the book of Revelation, entitled “Picture From Patmos: A Study of the Book of Revelation,” an e-book available from Amazon. --John Temples