

The Roman Empire: the Defender of Early First Century Christianity

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Abstract

All of the events, authors, and purposes of the books in the New Testament occurred under the reign of the Roman Empire (27 B.C.—A.D. 476). Therefore, an understanding of the Roman Empire is necessary for comprehending the historical context of the New Testament. In order to fully understand the impact of the Roman Empire on the New Testament, particularly before the destruction of the Jewish Temple in A.D. 70, Rome's effect on religion (and the religious laws that governed its practice) must be examined. Contrary to expectations, the Roman Empire emerges from this examination as the protector (not persecutor) of early Christianity. Scripture from this time period reveals a peaceful relationship between the new faith and Roman authorities.

The Roman Empire: The Defender of Early First Century Christianity

Any attempt to describe the life of first century Christians before A.D. 70 is ultimately tenuous without understanding the cultural background of the society in which they lived. All lands in the world of the New Testament were ruled by the Roman Empire. Therefore, an understanding of the Roman Empire is necessary for comprehending the historical context of the New Testament. However, the question remains as to how exactly the Romans influenced the writers of Scripture. Of particular interest to those who wish to accurately interpret the Word of God is the question of Rome's effect on religion in the New Testament era. With this problem, the interpreter is forced to consider what biblical passages correspond to Roman law and religion. Thus, in order to understand more fully certain aspects of the Christian religion, an understanding of Roman religious law (and the passages this law affects) is important.

Roman Laws

The history of the Roman Empire's persecution against Christianity and its adherents is well known and thoroughly documented.¹ However, this official persecution did not manifest itself in the early years of the movement. In fact, throughout most of the first century, Christianity grew peaceably within the Roman Empire. This security was due to Christianity's relationship to Judaism.² As long as Christians were identified as

¹ For example see Simeon L. Guterman, *Religious Toleration and Persecution in Ancient Rome* (London: Aiglon Press Ltd., 1951), 41-46; Robert M. Grant, *The Sword and the Cross* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 44-122; James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 102-109; Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1984), 31-48, 82-90, 102-108.

² Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 121.

members of the Jewish nation, they were tolerated.³ But how did Judaism rise to such a privileged position in the Roman Empire?⁴ The answer can be found by examining the history of the Jewish people and Rome and observing the support the Jews gave the Romans, when the latter first began venturing out into the Eastern Mediterranean. After looking at this history, the next natural question is what benefits did the Jews receive that made their position so enviable? Thus, the exact benefits and privileges granted to Judaism's practitioners will be considered. Having a proper understanding of Judaism's history with the Roman Empire and the benefits the Jews received from this relationship is necessary for accurately comprehending the historical background of the New Testament.

Judaism and Rome

The Roman policy toward Judaism exemplified an attitude of toleration that had its origins over 150 years before the first events of the New Testament. In 161 B.C., Rome entered into a declaration of friendship with Judea. The then independent kingdom of Judea, under Judas Maccabee, sought out Rome's help to protect them from the oppressive Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV; Rome, with the future in mind, consented to the arrangement in order to weaken the Seleucid Empire and open them up for eventual conquest.⁵ This incident is related in *1 Maccabees* 8, where Judas Maccabees sends some

³ Ibid., 157-158.

⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 404.

⁵ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 105.

of his men “to Rome, to make a league of amity and confederacy with them.”⁶ Later Hasmonean rulers would continue the alliance, even after Jerusalem was sacked by the Roman General Pompey in 63 B.C.⁷ The Jews enjoyed Rome’s protection from domination by the larger Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Parthian Empires.⁸

Already friendly with Rome, Jewish people around the world continued to support Rome’s attempts at conquest and those Roman leaders who would give them more privileges. For example in 55 B.C., Egyptian Jews supported Gabinius’ attempt to return Ptolemy XII Auletes to the throne.⁹ But probably the most important action of the Jews to assist Rome and bring them into the Empire’s favor was their support of Julius Caesar’s intervention in 47 B.C on Cleopatra’s behalf.¹⁰ Caesar had landed in Egypt after the assassination of Pompey, but was blockaded by Ptolemy XII in Alexandria. The Jewish ruler, Antipater, led his forces to Egypt to rescue Caesar. Antipater’s timely aid gave Caesar the victory, and led him to bestow favors on the Jews.¹¹ Shortly afterward, a decree by Caesar lists the Jews among his friends and allies.¹² This decree was the first of a series of official letters and edicts to Greek cities that instructed them to permit

⁶ *1 Maccabees* 8:17.

⁷ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 15; Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 78; Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 388.

⁸ *Ibid.* See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.10.

⁹ John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 113.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*; Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 404-405.

¹¹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 388.

¹² Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 112. See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.10.8.

Diaspora Jews to observe their traditional religious rites.¹³ This gave the Jews a recognized and distinctive status in many Mediterranean cities.¹⁴ In return, the Jews also offered military assistance to Caesar's eventual successor, Octavian (otherwise known as Augustus).¹⁵

All of these actions served only to bring the Jewish people into a position of favor with Rome. This position allowed the Jews to live in accordance with their ancestral laws.¹⁶ However, all the Romans actually did was continue the policy of the previous rulers of the Jews: the Ptolemies and the Seleucids.¹⁷ The Romans did this because "it was part of their policy in the East not to increase unduly the magnitude of their task of government."¹⁸ Instead, Rome chose to rule through alliances with local elites who would support the Roman-dominated status quo.¹⁹ Thus, no formal charter or Jewish bill of rights has been discovered.²⁰ In fact, the Romans dealt with each Jewish community separately and the policies differed between different magistrates and emperors.²¹ For the most part, Judaism was viewed by the Romans as a national cult in Palestine;

¹³ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 105.

¹⁴ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 405.

¹⁵ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 105.

¹⁶ Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 114.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 104.

¹⁹ Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 66.

²⁰ Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 114.

²¹ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 113, 119.

meaning that the Jewish position depended entirely on the nation.²² Thus, the legality of Judaism in Palestine was based on their treaty with the Roman Empire and the dispositions of the Hellenistic rulers.²³

Nevertheless, the Jews' favored status often led to problems with their Gentile neighbors, especially when Diaspora Jews aggravated the hosts of their Hellenistic home cities. In Eastern Mediterranean cities, where citizenship and nationality were not exclusive, Jewish people would often organize separate communities with distinct organization and jurisdiction.²⁴ Occasionally resentment for the Jews would develop based on their privileges and political advancement.²⁵ When trouble arose, concessions often had to be made on both sides. For example, the emperor Claudius told the Alexandrian Jews that they had a right to practice their religion, but not to cause conflict with the native Egyptians, as Alexandria was not the Jews' home.²⁶ Jews also had to deal with the fact that they did not believe in loyalty to a sovereign, but in the superiority of the Jewish law.²⁷ Despite these problems, the privileges afforded to the Jews lasted until after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in A.D. 70.²⁸

²² Ibid., 107, 158.

²³ Ibid., 158.

²⁴ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 90.

²⁵ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 404.

²⁶ Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 120.

²⁷ Ibid., 130.

²⁸ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 105.

Benefits of Judaism

Having dealt with the history between Rome and Judaism, the exact benefits given to the Jewish people must be addressed. In return for saving him in Egypt, Julius Caesar officially “granted the Jews the right to observe the Sabbath, freedom from military service (since this would inevitably conflict with observance of the Sabbath), the right to maintain the temple and observe Jewish festivals, and protection against attempts to destroy the Jewish Scriptures.”²⁹ He also reduced the tribute owed by the Jewish nation.³⁰ Later, Jews would be expected to revere, but did not have to worship, the emperor.³¹ To this end, a sacrifice was made twice daily for, but not to, the emperor.³² Ferguson writes that, “This consisted of two lambs and an ox, and was accepted by the Roman authorities as a sufficient expression of loyalty.”³³ This concession was so important to the Romans that its discontinuance in A.D. 66 signaled the start of the Jewish Revolt.³⁴ Along with this privilege, the Jews did not have to participate in pagan religious rituals.³⁵ Another benefit for Palestinian Jews was the excusal from taxes every seven years, so that the Jews could keep the biblical Sabbatical years.³⁶ The Romans also

²⁹ Ibid., 121. See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.10.12.

³⁰ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 388-389.

³¹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 121-122.

³² Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 532; Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 66.

³³ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 532.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 121.

³⁶ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 95.

allowed the Jews to send the annual tax of half a shekel to Jerusalem.³⁷ This was because Jerusalem, as a temple city, enjoyed a special status. Out of deference to the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem, the Roman military standard, with the emperor's image on it, was not brought into the city. Also, the Jews were allowed to use capital punishment to protect the temple from Gentile violators.³⁸ In addition, the Romans granted the Jewish high priesthood authority over most internal affairs.³⁹ However, the Roman governor regulated this benefit by controlling the appointment of high priests.⁴⁰ In the same manner, Roman forces held the high priestly garments in the Antonia fortress of Jerusalem and only released them to the Jews for festivals.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the large measure of control and freedom of worship given to the Jews illustrates how Judaism was an authorized religion and its synagogues authorized associations.⁴²

Summary of Roman Religious Laws and Judaism

In conclusion, Judaism's privileged position was due to compensations granted to the Jewish people throughout history and the Jewish nation's support of Rome during its years of conquest and expansion. This position gave the Jewish people many benefits, particularly freedom of religion, within the Roman Empire. These benefits included the free exercise of Judaism, exemption from worshipping Roman deities, the freedom to

³⁷ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 128. See Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 14.10.6.

³⁸ For example see Acts 21:26-31, where a Jewish crowd attempts to kill Paul because they believed he had brought one of his Gentile companions into the Temple.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁰ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 66; Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 128

⁴¹ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 128; Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 66.

⁴² Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 158.

regulate their own communities, exemption from military service, protection of Sabbath observation, and the ability to collect the temple tax.⁴³ Early Christians were able to enjoy the benefits of Judaism as well, by passing as members of the Jewish nation throughout most of the first century. In fact for the Roman Empire, “the institution of persecution of Christianity marks the first evidence of the cognizance by the government of religious differences.”⁴⁴ That early Christians enjoyed these benefits is evidenced by Pilate’s interaction with Jesus in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and the book of Acts, where Roman officials are portrayed as protectors who view Christianity as a sect of Judaism.⁴⁵ Thus, this historical background about the history and privileges of Judaism is necessary for properly interpreting New Testament passages concerning the Roman Empire.

Jesus and Pilate

In all four Gospels, Jesus appears before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Ultimately, Pilate sentences Christ to death on the cross. However, Pilate does not treat Jesus as a guilty criminal. Despite ordering his execution, the Gospel writers (particularly Matthew and Luke) present Pilate as a Roman official who considers the

⁴³ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 405.

⁴⁴ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 121.

⁴⁵ Matthew 27:11-26; Luke 23:1-25; Acts 18:12-16; 23:29; 24-26.

founder of Christianity innocent.⁴⁶ Pilate's statements are crucial to understanding the perception of Christianity among Romans in the first century.⁴⁷

Matthew

Matthew 27:11-26 "concentrates on the fact that Pilate does not seem to have thought Jesus guilty of any crime, but that there was unrelenting pressure from the Jewish leaders to bring about his crucifixion."⁴⁸ The Jewish authorities seek Jesus' death because they equate his statement in 26:64 (and Luke 22:69-70) with a profaning of God's glory. By claiming to be able sit at God's right hand, Jesus is declaring that He has a unique and highly exalted position before God that the Jewish leaders think is blasphemy.⁴⁹ These authorities believe that Jesus has condemned Himself by alluding to Psalm 110 and Daniel 7.⁵⁰ However, since this offense would have little bearing for the Romans, the Jewish leaders charge Jesus with being "the king of the Jews;" a charge Pilate, as a Roman official, cannot ignore.⁵¹ Since Pilate was responsible for settling

⁴⁶ The descriptions of Pilate in Mark and John will not be considered in this paper. Mark does not contain a direct statement of Jesus' innocence by Pilate. For the purposes of this paper, a post-A.D. 70 date for the completion of the Gospel of John will be assumed. Thus, its statements about Pilate are not essential for this discussion. See David A. Croteau, "An Analysis of the Arguments for the Dating of the Fourth Gospel," *Faith and Mission* 20:3 (2003): 47-80.

⁴⁷ It is important to note that there are two settings of the Gospels: the life setting of Christ and the life setting of the church. Both settings need to be considered while interpreting the Gospels. However, this thesis will focus on the life setting of the church. This setting highlights Luke's presentation of Pilate as representative of Roman authority during his audience's day.

⁴⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 698.

⁴⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, vol. 2, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1801.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1802.

⁵¹ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 1048.

disputes, keeping order, and administering justice he must attend to this matter.⁵²

However, Pilate does not believe the charges or that Jesus is guilty of a capital offense as his push for amnesty and abdication of responsibility indicate.⁵³ Instead, Pilate seeks to release Jesus because he is impressed by His silence under interrogation, he recognizes that Jesus has broken no Roman law, and witnesses a supposedly supernatural attestation to the innocence of Jesus through his wife's dream.⁵⁴ It is interesting to note that Pilate does not come out well in Matthew, as he ignored his wife's warning and gave orders for a man he considered innocent to be executed.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Pilate realized that no crime had been demonstrated and thus, he regarded Jesus' death as murder.⁵⁶ This viewpoint is illustrated by an incident that is unique to Matthew's Gospel: Pilate washing his hands in verse 24.⁵⁷ Still, he allowed Jesus' crucifixion because he had to appease both his Roman rulers and his Jewish subjects.⁵⁸ Therefore, a persecuting Roman Empire is not exhibited, but as Morris writes, "The picture we get is that of a mob out of control and baying for blood, and in that emotional atmosphere a governor who was not thinking clearly and who was ready to take the easy way out."⁵⁹

⁵² Warren Carter, *Pontius Pilate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 45-46.

⁵³ France, *The Gospel*, 1049.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ France, *The Gospel*, 1048. This unflattering portrayal of Pilate may fit in with his unfavorable reputation in Rome after he was removed from his office.

⁵⁶ Morris, *The Gospel*, 706-707.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 706.

⁵⁸ Carter, *Pontius Pilate*, 50-54.

⁵⁹ Morris, *The Gospel*, 707.

Luke

As in Matthew, Luke 23:1-25 presents the Jews acquiring permission from the Roman representative, Pontius Pilate, to execute Jesus; however, only Luke notes the official charges the Jewish leadership presented.⁶⁰ Bock writes that the Jewish leaders “begin by citing two broad accusations (what Jesus is doing in the Jewish nation) and end with a more specific offense (what Jesus is doing against Rome).”⁶¹ First, the Jews present Jesus as a disturber of the peace because he misled the nation. This charge was chosen because Pilate was charged with upholding the “peace of Rome,” the moral order ordained by the gods. To deviate from this religio-political order invoked shame and violated the sacred nature of the world.⁶² Green writes that “in Pilate’s ears, ‘leading the people astray’ would likely have been commensurate with rebellion and civil unrest.”⁶³ Second, Jesus is falsely accused of tax evasion (since He endorses the paying of taxes three chapters earlier in Luke 20:25).⁶⁴ The Jewish leaders probably chose to use this charge because it directly threatens the region’s financial administrator, Pilate.⁶⁵ Third, the Jews attempt to paint Jesus as a seditious revolutionary by stating His declaration that He is an Anointed One (king).⁶⁶ However, Pilate will realize that Jesus’ kingship is not a

⁶⁰ Bock, *Luke*, 1808-1810.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1810.

⁶² Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 799.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 800.

⁶⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 1810.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 1811.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

threat, as He is a king, but not one seeking to overthrow Rome.⁶⁷ Another way to view this passage is to recognize only the first accusation as an actual charge against Jesus (since it is repeated in verses 5 and 14) and the other two statements as mere elaborations.⁶⁸ Regardless, these charges portray Jesus “as rebelling against Rome, but the irony is that it is the leadership that is rebelling against God’s Chosen One.”⁶⁹

Nevertheless, Pilate is unconvinced by these charges and declares Jesus’ innocence in verses 4, 14, and 22; but this does little to quell the Jewish leadership.⁷⁰ Their insistence on condemning Jesus exposes Pilate’s inability to follow through on his judgment. Bock notes that, “Politics and public relations with the masses win over justice... Luke wants his reader to see that Jesus did not die a guilty man, but as an innocent lamb at the altar of political expediency.”⁷¹ This theme of Jewish pressure on Roman legal cases will be continued by Luke in the book of Acts.⁷² For the present purpose, it will suffice to note that at least twice, Luke reveals in Pilate’s direct speech that he had been unable to find any basis for the death of Jesus.⁷³ Thus, Pilate makes three definite efforts to release Jesus and tries multiple times to persuade the crowd to

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Green, *The Gospel*, 799-800.

⁶⁹ Bock, *Luke*, 1812.

⁷⁰ Bock, *Luke*, 1812-1813.

⁷¹ Ibid., 1813.

⁷² Green, *The Gospel*, 811. These cases will be examined in the next portion of the paper.

⁷³ Green, *The Gospel*, 807. See verses 4, 14, and 22.

accept his judgment (including three times within the final effort alone).⁷⁴ When Pilate's final compromise of whipping Jesus and releasing Him is rejected by the crowd, he finally orders Jesus' execution.⁷⁵ Still, Pilate's view of Jesus is best summarized by Bock's observation that, "The Jews claim to have found three charges against Jesus, but Pilate finds nothing in his legal examination of Jesus."⁷⁶ Therefore, in both Matthew and Luke, the Roman official believes that Jesus is innocent. These accounts of Pilate's actions illustrate that, in Roman eyes, Christianity was not a crime punishable by death and anticipate how Christianity will be viewed in Acts.

Paul's Roman Trials in Acts

Like Jesus, Paul undergoes several trials in the book of Acts before Roman officials. These leaders agree with Pilate's perspective on Christianity, but go much further to protect Paul than did Pilate for Jesus.⁷⁷

Gallio

The first of these trials occurs in Acts 18:12-16 before the proconsul of Achaia: Gallio. For the first time in Acts, the Jewish opposition to Christianity does not stir up a crowd or approach the local authorities; instead, they charge Paul before the Roman administrator of the province.⁷⁸ The Jews charge Paul with persuading men to worship

⁷⁴ Bock, *Luke*, 1826.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1828.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1827.

⁷⁷ This is most likely because Paul was a Roman citizen.

⁷⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 351.

against the law and ask Gallio to force Paul to leave Corinth.⁷⁹ They accuse Christianity of not being a true form of Judaism and deny that it is a legally recognized religion.⁸⁰

This trial is important because it sets the precedent for how Christianity will be treated by the Roman Empire for the next decade. Bruce postulates that, “Had the proconsul of Achaia pronounced a judgment unfavorable to Paul, the progress of Christianity during the next decade or so could have been attended by much greater difficulties than were actually experienced.”⁸¹ Fortunately, Gallio does not see a crime and determines that the conflict is about the Jewish law.⁸² Gallio thought Paul was promoting a form of Judaism which was not to the liking of the leaders of the local Jewish community; and he refused to adjudicate on the matter.⁸³ Luke uses this episode to make the point that Christianity is not a threat to the Roman Empire. Rome will not meddle in religion other than to determine which religions are legitimate and Luke eagerly promotes Christianity as a legitimate faith.⁸⁴

Claudius Lysias and Felix

The next individual who declares Paul’s innocence before Rome is Claudius Lysias, the Roman tribune in Jerusalem. His statement of Paul’s innocence in 23:29 is

⁷⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Acts*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 580-581.

⁸⁰ Bock, *Acts*, 581; Bruce, *Acts*, 353.

⁸¹ Bruce, *Acts*, 352.

⁸² Bock, *Acts*, 581.

⁸³ Bruce, *Acts*, 353.

⁸⁴ Bock, *Acts*, 582.

the first of many in the last few chapters of Acts.⁸⁵ The statement appears in a letter that Lysias writes to the governor, Felix. Lysias is under the conviction that the dispute that has placed Paul in protective custody was not about Roman law, but about Jewish theological interpretation.⁸⁶ Lysias' statement is important because it pictures a "neutral" third party assessing Paul's conflict with the Jews and determining that it is an internal debate.⁸⁷ Also, Lysias' phrase "he has done nothing worthy of death" parallels Pilate's statement about Jesus in Luke 23:14-15.⁸⁸

Next, Claudius Lysias turns Paul over to Felix and Paul's second Roman trial of the book begins in Acts 24. The Jews charge Paul with being "(1) a pest, (2) a political agitator, (3) the leader of a sectarian movement, and (4) one who tried to be disruptive at the temple."⁸⁹ Bruce summarizes the charges by writing that "Paul is (a) a fomenter of risings among Jews all over the empire, (b) a ringleader of the Nazarene sect, (c) a man who had attempted to violate the sanctity of the temple."⁹⁰ The Jews are implying that Paul was disturbing the peace through his seditious membership in a dangerous sect.⁹¹ Paul responds to these charges by stating that he was only in the Temple to worship and

⁸⁵ Ibid., 683. The other statements are in 24:19-20, 25:25, 26:31, and 28:18.

⁸⁶ Bruce, *Acts*, 435.

⁸⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 683.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 691.

⁹⁰ Bruce, *Acts*, 439.

⁹¹ Bock, *Acts*, 691.

was apprehended by the Jews because he believes in the resurrection of the dead.⁹² In brief, Paul presents Christianity as neither a threat to Rome nor any other government. By not breaking any laws, Paul is blameless before both God and man.⁹³ Felix agrees with Lysias that Paul is innocent, but he leaves Paul in jail because “he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him.”⁹⁴ Once he was removed from office, Felix still left Paul imprisoned in order to appease the Jewish Sanhedrin. Luke uses this and the other trials in Acts to illustrate that there is no merit to charges of sedition against Christians. Bruce notes that “competent and impartial judges had repeatedly confirmed the innocence of the Christian movement and the Christian missionaries in respect of Roman law.”⁹⁵

Festus and Agrippa

Felix was succeeded as governor by Festus. The new governor began his administration by reopening Paul’s trial in Acts 25:1-12. Paul is once again charged with breaking Jewish law and violating the sacred nature of the Temple.⁹⁶ In turn Paul replies that he has done nothing against the Jews, the Temple, or Caesar and that he is both a good Jew, as well as a good citizen.⁹⁷ When Festus attempts to move the trial back to

⁹² Ibid., 692-694.

⁹³ Ibid., 697.

⁹⁴ Acts 24:26, NKJV.

⁹⁵ Bruce, *Acts*, 439.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 451.

⁹⁷ Bock, *Acts*, 701.

Jerusalem, Paul asks to remain in a Roman court that Roman justice may be done.⁹⁸

Bock notes that Paul's request to be sent to Caesar demonstrates that "the new movement is severing itself formally from Jewish judicial care and seeking the protection of the state."⁹⁹

Once Paul's trial before Festus ends, Paul is kept in prison until he can be sent to Rome. While awaiting his departure, King Herod Agrippa visits Festus and hears Paul's defense of himself and Christianity in Acts 26. Bock points out that, "In defending himself, Paul is also explaining that the roots of this new faith are in fact old, reaching into Jewish promise."¹⁰⁰ Paul's speech makes Festus realize that Paul had done nothing to incur a major penalty and was, in fact, completely innocent in the eyes of Roman law.¹⁰¹ Once Paul was taken back to his cell, Festus conferred with Agrippa and determined that Paul did not even deserve imprisonment.¹⁰² Bruce realizes that, "The present unanimous agreement on Paul's innocence is a further contribution to Luke's general apologetic motive."¹⁰³ Thus throughout Acts, Luke presents Paul and Christianity as complementary with the Roman Empire. None of the Roman officials in

⁹⁸ Ibid., 702.

⁹⁹ Ibid. Paul has used the Roman legal system for his own protection before. See Acts 16:37; 22:25; and 23:27.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 714.

¹⁰¹ Bruce, *Acts*, 472.

¹⁰² Bock, *Acts*, 724.

¹⁰³ Bruce, *Acts*, 472.

Acts think that Paul is guilty of any crime.¹⁰⁴ The relationship between Christianity and the Roman Empire, in the book of Acts, is not characterized by antagonism.

Romans 10:9

A passage that may illustrate a conflict between Christianity and Rome before A.D. 70 is Romans 10:9.¹⁰⁵ The verse reads, "...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (ESV). Some interpreters have argued that the phrase "Jesus is Lord" is a Christian retort to the Roman "Caesar is Lord." They say that in the first century, the Roman religious law required emperor worship and regularly the populace would be forced to confess "Caesar is Lord." The Christians who refused to make this confession would be immediately executed. Those who use this illustration then emphasize the importance of lordship salvation and the doctrine of regeneration.¹⁰⁶ However, examining background materials reveals a very different picture of Christianity in the early First century. Emperor worship did not lead to Christian martyrdom at the time of the composition of the book of Romans. In fact, the persecution of Christians was not usually practiced by the Romans throughout the first century. Instead, the Roman

¹⁰⁴ When he arrived in Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself and receive guests, indicating the lack of a threat he appeared to be in the Roman eyes. See Acts 27:3; 28:16, 30-31.

¹⁰⁵ Romans 8:35-36 will not be discussed in this paper because Moo (Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 543-44) seems to think it is more "testimonial" and Dunn (James D. G. Dunn, *Romans*, WBC (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 1:504-506) agreeing, also places this in an eschatological context. Furthermore, the whole issue is complicated by the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

¹⁰⁶ The author of this paper is not disagreeing with the theological conclusions of these interpreters. Nevertheless, as this paper will demonstrate, the author finds a problem with using this faulty historical context of Romans 10:9 to support this position.

government and its religious laws appear to have been an asset and not an obstacle to the early church.

Emperor Worship

While this topic has been briefly explored in its relationship to Judaism, emperor worship deserves a fuller observation here in light of Romans 10:9. Emperor worship was started by the first Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus. To foster support for his new empire, Augustus worked to improve Roman society. Part of this improvement program involved the revitalization of religious life through new cultic expressions that were connected with the emperor.¹⁰⁷ Nevertheless, Augustus only decreed that Romans should worship his genius, his divine, presiding spirit from which his power emanated.¹⁰⁸ The activities involved with the imperial cult included, "...offering cult to the emperor's accompanying genius ...elevating the imperial family to a divine status, making dedications to a deity and the emperor, relating various divinities to the emperor as his protectors and helpers, and personifying the qualities and benefactions of the emperor."¹⁰⁹ Throughout the first century, the cult of the living emperor grew in popularity. This led to oaths being sworn to the genius of the emperor and even the use of the Greek term "kyrios" (lord) to refer to the Empire's ruler.¹¹⁰

The emergence of this religious cult raises the question of whether or not it caused the persecution of Christians. However, it is important to remember that, the social and

¹⁰⁷ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 209.

¹⁰⁸ Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 211.

¹¹⁰ Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World*, 101.

political importance of the ruler cult was greater than the religious meaning because it served as a testimony to loyalty.¹¹¹ In fact, “The Romans did not require anyone to worship only the emperor; they allowed people to retain their own religious beliefs.”¹¹² Rather, emperor worship was voluntary and could easily be avoided by the average Christian, because it was not a part of everyday life.¹¹³ Problems only arose in the late first century when emperor worship was used as a loyalty test. Since Christianity does not demand literal sacrifices, Christians might be asked by Roman authorities to swear an oath of loyalty to Caesar as a substitute for offering sacrifices to the emperor’s image.¹¹⁴

An example of imperial loyalty oaths being used as the means of determining persecution is the martyrdom of Polycarp around the year A. D. 150. This example is also the only recorded occurrence of the phrase “Caesar is Lord” as the loyalty test. According to the story, the Romans “...picked up Polycarp at a farm outside the city, and on their way to the city they tried to persuade him to say “Caesar is Lord” and to offer sacrifice, but he informed them that he would not follow their advice.”¹¹⁵ Polycarp would go on to profess his loyalty to Christ rather than to the Roman emperor before being executed.¹¹⁶ However, other than this story, the only other record of imperial loyalty oaths leading to Christian deaths comes from letters between Pliny the Younger

¹¹¹ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 199.

¹¹² Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World*, 101.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹⁴ Grant, *The Sword*, 85.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

and the Emperor Trajan about 40 years before Polycarp's death. In their correspondence (the first in which Christianity is identified by the Romans), Pliny reveals that he used loyalty oaths to convict captured Christians. Nevertheless, Trajan did not approve of using oaths in this matter.¹¹⁷ In fact, Trajan replied that Christians are not to be sought out and that anonymous accusations against them must be ignored.¹¹⁸ He added that "...anyone who denies he is a Christian, and proves it 'by offering prayers to our gods', is to receive 'pardon on the score of his repentance' and be set free."¹¹⁹ While this account does give evidence that emperor worship was directly responsible for Christian martyrdom, it happened in the second century (well over fifty years after the composition of the book of Romans) and thus cannot be definitively attributed to Paul's use of "Jesus is Lord" in Romans 10:9.¹²⁰

Persecution

Persecution against Christians on the part of the Roman government is referenced in the New Testament. Christians' abstinence from emperor worship may have led to the executions that affected the church at Pergamum in the book of Revelation.¹²¹ However, this information does not change the fact that Roman persecution against Christians did

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 53, 85.

¹¹⁸ G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 111.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 111.

¹²⁰ Both Vanlaningham (Michael G. Vanlaningham, "Romans," in *What the New Testament Authors Really Cared About*, eds. Kenneth Berding and Matt Williams (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 140) and Bushwell (James Oliver Bushwell Jr., "Letter to the Romans," in *New International Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 870) date the writing of Romans to around A.D. 57.

¹²¹ De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 111.

not begin until A.D. 64.¹²² Before this time, Christianity was considered part of Judaism. Christians would have received the same religious exemptions allowed for the Jews. This provision would have continued from Christianity's founding until the Jews convinced the Romans that Christians were a distinct group that should be treated differently.¹²³ In fact, "...no edict was passed against Christianity in the first one and a half centuries of its existence."¹²⁴ If one had been passed, persecution would have been more general and continuous.¹²⁵ While sporadic persecution popped up during the reigns of Domitian (A.D. 81-96), Trajan (98-117), Marcus Aurelius (161-180), and Septimius Severus (193-211), Christian persecution was not intended to occur across the entire empire until the Emperor Decius' order in A.D. 249.¹²⁶ Decius "...demanded of his non-Jewish subjects that they should sacrifice, plain and simple, without requesting from them any specific beliefs or theology or recognition of any named gods."¹²⁷

Rather than a persecutor, the Roman government appears in background materials, and even the New Testament, as a protector.¹²⁸ History shows that, "The early Christians attracted little attention from the Roman government, were not persecuted, and

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 602.

¹²⁴ Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World*, 109.

¹²⁵ Leon Hardy Canfield, *Early Persecutions of the Christians* (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1968), 36.

¹²⁶ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, 1-3, 33-38, 40-41, 45-48, 82-85; Ittai Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 367.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 2. This persecution under Decius led to the martyrdom of Pionius.

¹²⁸ Harold Mattingly, *Christianity in the Roman Empire* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1967), 30.

might even be protected against their enemies, the Jews.”¹²⁹ As described above, Paul uses his Roman citizenship throughout the book of Acts to get him out of trouble with local Jewish populations. While the Roman governors may have been ignorant of the implications of Christianity (as Paul did not believe that the emperor should be worshipped), Acts shows that they did not see a need to persecute Paul for his faith.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, persecution did exist under Domitian in the late first century. Still, it only occurred when Christians refused to respect the simple rituals of the Roman religion, such as sacrificing to the gods.¹³¹ In fact, this persecution was not a new principle but was grounded in well established laws.¹³² Christian persecution began for social and political reasons that fit within Rome’s policy of dealing with foreign religions.¹³³ The fact that Christians were “...hated and were now and then suppressed by the Roman government does not imply the introduction of any new religious policy.”¹³⁴ New religious cults were tolerated by the Romans until they were reputed to be immoral or became “...a danger to the good order and security of the state.”¹³⁵ Therefore, Rome’s opposition to Christianity was based on the Christians’ refusal to participate in the state cults. This meant that “the persecution was religious so far as it was based on the cult; it was political, however, to a greater extent, because it was based

¹²⁹ Ibid., 39.

¹³⁰ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 42. See Philippians 2:11.

¹³¹ De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 112.

¹³² Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 45.

¹³³ Canfield, *Early Persecutions*, 18.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 22-23.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 19.

also on the violation of the patriotic ceremonies of the Empire.”¹³⁶ Nevertheless, the conflict of belief was only acted upon in times of crisis because the Romans believed that Christians were “...potentially but not actually dangerous to the peace and security of the Roman Empire.”¹³⁷

For all the reasons listed above, the Neronian persecution shocked the Roman Church.¹³⁸ In A.D. 64, Emperor Nero began the first Roman persecution against Christians in the city of Rome. For the first (and certainly not the last) time, Rome deliberately targeted Christians for execution. However, once Nero died, the persecution largely ceased because there was no real legal basis for Nero’s personal vendetta against Christianity.¹³⁹ Later, under Trajan, this episode would form the precedent for further trials and eventually brought about persecution ‘for the name.’¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the Christian community enjoyed a considerable period of peace after Nero.¹⁴¹ Serious Roman persecution would not return until Domitian’s reign at the end of the first century. Thus, for Roman persecution to be as rampant in A.D. 57 (as the interpreters of “Jesus is Lord” would contend), Christians must have been recognized by Rome before Nero began his rule. However, historical analysis reveals that Christianity did not garner

¹³⁶ Guterman, *Religious Toleration*, 160.

¹³⁷ Grant, *The Sword*, 16.

¹³⁸ Mattingly, *Christianity*, 31.

¹³⁹ Canfield, *Early Persecutions*, 122.

¹⁴⁰ Mattingly, *Christianity*, 33.

¹⁴¹ Canfield, *Early Persecutions*, 44.

serious attention in the reign of Tiberius or Caligula and was quickly overlooked in the decades following Nero's persecutions.¹⁴²

Verdict on Romans 10:9

After an examination of emperor worship and the history of Christian persecution, it is hard to believe that Paul used the phrase "Jesus is Lord" as a reference to the persecution inflicted on Christians by the Imperial Cult. While it is equally a stretch to say that "...emperor-worship is a factor of almost no independent importance in the persecution of the Christians,"¹⁴³ it was most likely not a persecuting force when Romans was written. A more judicious conclusion is that Emperor worship only became a problem for Christians in the second century when emperor worship was implemented as a loyalty test.¹⁴⁴ The Romans rarely tried to hunt down and terminate Christians before the mid-third century. Instead, "Roman repression of religion was selective, sporadic and short-lived."¹⁴⁵ Very few commentaries even acknowledge that "Jesus is Lord" may be based on "Caesar is Lord" and those that do point out that the phrase in Romans, "...lacks the public and polemical connotation of the latter."¹⁴⁶ Regeneration is an important doctrine but it must be defended apart from Romans 10:9, because when the book of Romans was written, even the Romans themselves did not believe that "Caesar is Lord."

¹⁴² Mattingly, *Christianity*, 30.

¹⁴³ De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution*, 112.

¹⁴⁴ Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World*, 102.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁴⁶ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 591.

1 Peter 2:12-17

1 Peter 2:12-17 is another passage that may have a relationship to Roman religious law. Carter believes that “First Peter’s emphasis on ‘good conduct’ and submission may suggest an expectation that Christians would be involved in imperial celebrations.”¹⁴⁷ Thus Carter thinks that Peter was telling his readers to be actively involved in emperor worship in order to avoid persecution. But can this assumption be made from 1 Peter 2:12-17?

1 Peter 2:12-17 in Context

1 Peter was written to Christians living in the Asia Minor provinces of Pontus, Cappadocia, Galatia, Asia, and Bithynia.¹⁴⁸ It was written by the apostle Peter from Babylon (5:13), which was widely believed to be a code word for Rome, the heart of the Roman Empire.¹⁴⁹ Tenny thinks that “1 Peter was written about the year 64, when the status of Christians in the empire was very uncertain and when persecution had already begun in Rome.”¹⁵⁰ Thus, he sees the major theme of the book as suffering and views hope as the Christian way of meeting it.¹⁵¹ On the other hand, Jobes points to Peter’s optimism and faith in the legal system of the Roman Empire and sees the letter as being written a few years earlier in the late years of Claudius’ reign or the early years of

¹⁴⁷ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 79.

¹⁴⁸ Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 19.

¹⁴⁹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 13. Rome is also called Babylon in the book of Revelation and in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writings.

¹⁵⁰ Merrill C. Tenny, “Peter, First Letter of,” in *New International Bible Dictionary*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1987), 774.

¹⁵¹ Tenny, “Peter, First,” 773.

Nero's.¹⁵² In broader terms the theme of the book is "the relationship between the Christian and culture."¹⁵³ The Christians Peter was writing to were suffering because of the differences between themselves and their neighbors' priorities, values, and allegiances.¹⁵⁴ In light of culture's response to Christianity, Peter wrote to encourage his audience to hold to their faith in Christ.¹⁵⁵

In order to put an end to the false accusations of their neighbors, Christians had to live lives of "impeccable and transparent goodness."¹⁵⁶ God sees Christians as His nation and is concerned about how His people are perceived by the rest of the world.¹⁵⁷ This passage seems to be instructing "Christians to adopt behaviors that enable them to fit in with the norms of the rest of society."¹⁵⁸ The behavior of believers should be such that even their pagan neighbors would view them as "good."¹⁵⁹ Peter hoped that the example of believers would lead their pagan neighbors to turn to Christ and so "glorify God on the day of visitation" (v. 12).¹⁶⁰

¹⁵² Jobes, *1 Peter*, 176.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁵⁶ John Phillips, *Exploring the Epistles of Peter* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2005), 104.

¹⁵⁷ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 169-170.

¹⁵⁸ Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 78.

¹⁵⁹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 170.

¹⁶⁰ J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 118.

Also, Christians must obey the law of the land, not because the state requires it, but for the sake of God's reputation among those who do not know Him and to avoid needlessly offending the civil authority.¹⁶¹ Peter fears that some of his audience will assume that their freedom from paganism also frees them from their legitimate obligations to Rome and their households.¹⁶² He was afraid that his audience would view their new life in Christ as “an excuse to cause trouble” or as a justification for antisocial behavior.”¹⁶³ Phillips sees the text as Peter's recognition “that government is an institution of God and that a country's laws must be obeyed for the common good of all.”¹⁶⁴ Therefore, submission to secular or political authority will go a long way toward silencing the slander directed against believers.¹⁶⁵ The primary Christian obligation of reverence towards God demands respect for the emperor and his subjects (including his local representative).¹⁶⁶ Peter appears to be acting under the assumption that loyalty to God and loyalty to the emperor will not normally come into conflict.¹⁶⁷ In fact, “He seems to assume that if Christians live as good citizens, the ruling authorities will look with favor upon them (if they are doing the job they were appointed to do)—or at least

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 124, 127; Phillips, *Exploring*, 108.

¹⁶² Michaels, *1 Peter*, 129.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Phillips, *Exploring*, 109.

¹⁶⁵ Jobses, *1 Peter*, 174; Michaels, *1 Peter*, xxxv.

¹⁶⁶ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 125, 132.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

not trouble them.”¹⁶⁸ Since the believers’ troubles stemmed mostly from the general populace and not the governing authorities, Peter counts on Roman justice to resolve the reckless charges leveled against Christians.¹⁶⁹ As Phillips notes, “True Christianity has nothing to fear from impartial observation.”¹⁷⁰ Thus, Peter wrote this passage to admonish Christians to make sure that none of the charges leveled against them were true and a challenge to his readers to live by their Christian and cultural values (through giving each type of relationship its due), but be willing to suffer when those values conflict.¹⁷¹

What effect do these observations have on Carter’s view? Carter points out that the passage only calls for submission and does not say “submit except in circumstances involving sacrifices.”¹⁷² Thus, Carter believes that Peter was telling his readers to participate in the emperor worship of street festivals, trade guilds, and household observance; but secretly reverence Christ in their hearts.¹⁷³ In Carter’s view, the book of Revelation then is in conflict with 1 Peter because it calls for withdrawing from the demonic religious, political, economic, and social structures of the Roman Empire even at the cost of social and economic hardship.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 123; Jobes, *1 Peter*, 176.

¹⁶⁹ Michaels, *1 Peter*, 126.

¹⁷⁰ Phillips, *Exploring*, 113.

¹⁷¹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 171, 177; Michaels, *1 Peter*, 129.

¹⁷² Carter, *The Roman Empire*, 79.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 79-80.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 81.

Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that the original audience would have understood the text as Carter suggests. First, Carter underestimates the difference between the historical context of 1 Peter and Revelation. As mentioned above, the recipients of 1 Peter were already being ostracized by their unbelieving peers. 1 Peter was written to encourage these Christians and instruct them on how to engage the culture around them. Thus, the audience of 1 Peter was most likely not experiencing government persecution and did not need to compromise their faith through emperor worship, because Christians are not called upon to obey laws that violate morality or their conscience before God.¹⁷⁵ Second, nothing in 1 Peter explicitly states that the writer was approving emperor worship. Instead, other scholars think that Peter is addressing more secular areas of social involvement. Winter notes that in the first century, the Roman government would promise public recognition to those who did good deeds for the city.¹⁷⁶ While he is not certain, Winter has a much more plausible position that this passage is commending public works to Christians as God's will, "because they will also silence the unfounded rumors against Christians by ill-informed men."¹⁷⁷ If Christians lived as model citizens in the cities of the Roman Empire, the Romans would view those who slandered Christians as far more troublesome than believers.¹⁷⁸ Third, Peter did not view the entire Roman society as an evil entity opposed to the good Christian community. He recognizes that there is some positive value in Roman culture and

¹⁷⁵ Phillips, *Exploring*, 110. See Acts 5.

¹⁷⁶ Bruce W. Winter, "The Public Honoring of Christian Benefactors: Romans 13:1-4 and 1 Peter 2:14-15," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34 (1988): 90.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

encourages his readers not to completely withdraw from it.¹⁷⁹ In summary, Winter counters Carter's position by concluding that, "The aim according to the text was for doing good for refutation and not for assimilation."¹⁸⁰

The Principle of 1 Peter 2:12-17

The theological principle from 1 Peter 2:12-17 is that followers of God should strive to live as exemplary citizens within their respective societies in order to demonstrate Christian living to the unbelieving world. This principle does not mean that believers should assimilate with the sinful aspects of their culture. Rather, it encourages Christians to engage in appropriate societal involvement to reach others for Christ.

Therefore, 1 Peter 2:12-17 is not about emperor worship, nor is it about Roman religious law. However, the passage can be summarized by Jobes' statement that "The challenge Peter presents to the thoughtful Christian is to live by the good values of society that are consistent with Christian values and to reject those that are not, thereby maintaining one's distinctive Christian identity."¹⁸¹

Conclusion

Before the destruction of the Temple, Christianity's relationship with the Roman Empire was largely peaceful. For their faithful service, the Jews had been afforded special religious privileges by the Empire. Since the Romans viewed Christians as Jews, believers were spared religious persecution. While Jesus was executed by the order of Pontius Pilate, Pilate publically stated multiple times that Jesus was innocent and did not

¹⁷⁹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 170.

¹⁸⁰ Winter, "The Public," 96.

¹⁸¹ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 171.

deserve to die. Proclamations of the innocence of Christians continue in the book of Acts during Paul's trials. Thus, Roman officials in the Bible appear more often as Christian protectors, not persecutors. This means that the statement "Jesus is Lord" in Romans 10:9 and Peter's instructions on living in society in 1 Peter 2:12-17 are not references to emperor worship nor Roman persecution. While the Romans eventually did begin a systematic persecution of Christians,¹⁸² the first few decades of Christianity witnessed a peaceful relationship between the new faith and the Empire. Understanding this relationship is vital to comprehending the message of the New Testament.

¹⁸² As described above, persecution first appeared in the city of Rome in A.D. 64, but it was not empire-wide until A.D. 249.

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