

Roman Citizenship, Bondservants, and Slaves in the First Century

Roman society was organized economically, legally and culturally. The Roman middle class was small, and was made up primarily of small landowners and shopkeepers who often were not much better off than the poor. The list below only partly describes Roman social stratifications (which could be a lesson in itself):

- **Roman citizens** made up a very small majority of the empire (6-8%) and had rights denied those that Rome conquered. Citizens did not have to pay taxes.
 - a. **Patrician** families were wealthy, influential landowning families
 - i. **Senators** served in the Senate (by their Patrician birth status) and governed Rome
 - ii. **Equestrians** were wealthy property owners who chose business or leisure over politics
 - b. **Plebeians** were the working class and were men without substantial wealth who worked for their living. These were either free-born or purchased their citizenship for themselves and their heirs for “*a large sum of money*” (Acts 22:28). Women could not be citizens.
- **Freeborn** were local peoples of the nations that Rome had conquered, who paid taxes as were levied locally, and they generally had some rights. They enjoyed “Pax Romana” (“Roman peace”) and were governed locally by Roman-appointed officials and protected by Rome. They were not citizens.
- **Bondservants** were (for any number of reasons) “bound” to their master for a period of time, often against their will, and were one step above being a slave. They made up a large segment of the population of the empire, and if they escaped were returned to their masters.
- **Slaves**, were taken in war (and the victors sold them as a part of their war booty), or because they had fallen deeply into debt and could not repay. The most “famous” Christian slave was Onesimus of the book of Philemon.

The Role of Local Roman Government

The role of the local Roman government was primarily to collect taxes (to keep the money flowing to Rome), keep the local peace, and apprise Rome of any difficulties they could not handle locally.

Local Roman governors were appointed by the emperor. The emperors made it a point to know each governor. Examples from scripture are Herod the Great, “The friend of Rome”; Pontius Pilate; Antonius Felix¹ (the governor who wanted a bribe before he would release Paul); and Porcius Festus (Felix’s successor, who sent Paul to Rome when he appealed to Caesar).

Because they had the emperor’s backing (which included the most powerful army in the world) **these men ruled through fear**. They often incorporated various methods of the death penalty for offenses including crucifixion, being buried alive and impaling. Having one’s head quickly removed by a sharp sword was considered a “higher” form of capital punishment and was generally reserved for citizens or the upper classes.

The Roman army was a powerful and fear-inducing weapon. The Romans had taken the lessons of the Greek phalanx (used most effectively by Phillip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great to conquer Greece and much of the known world) and greatly improved upon the armament, battle formations, tactics, siege mechanisms, larger weapons and supply trains to create a formidable army. **Roman soldiers were tough, hardened warriors**. Legions were stationed throughout the empire and their commanders reported both to Rome and the local governor.

¹ In 58, Felix hired two assassins to murder Jonathan (the Jewish high priest) shortly after Jonathan had taken office. (Jonathan had often criticized Felix and had threatened to report him to Claudius Caesar; it was Jonathan who had recommended Felix for the appointment.) Felix’s son Marcus Antonius Agrippa later died (along with most of the other inhabitants of Pompeii and Herculaneum) in the deadly eruption of Mount Vesuvius on August 24, 79 AD.

A Map of The Cities and Regions in Our Study



- **Syria** was a Roman province north of Judea and Galilee and was based upon the Old Testament kingdom of Syria. It contained the cities of Damascus and Antioch; it was Antioch that sent Paul on his missionary journeys recorded in Acts.
- **Macedonia** was an ancient city-state of what is today Greece; people in that area continue to view themselves as “Macedonians” first and “Greeks” second², even today.
- The Roman province of **Galatia** (we will be studying southern Galatia) in ancient times was made up of three Celtic tribes who replaced the ancient Hittites. More to follow on Galatia on the next page!
- The Roman province of **Asia** (Asia Minor) is today western Turkey, whose capital is Istanbul. In the Old Testament most of the area was primarily Hittite, but late in the Old Testament and into the early first century it became a part of the “Ionian” region of Greece through Greek military conquest.
- In Revelation, Christ wrote to seven of the (many!) churches of Asia (right), giving us a clear picture of where they were spiritually by the end of the first century.



² Alexander’s father Phillip II of Macedon was born 98 years after Esther’s husband King Xerxes I (“Ahasuerus”) was defeated by the Greeks at the battle of Salamis, a turning point in world history, which occurred between chapters 1 and 2 of the Book of Esther in 480 BC. (The big party that Ahasuerus was throwing for his nobles in Esther chapter 1 was probably in preparation for their planned conquest of Greece. But God had other plans for Greece and for Persia.)