

What influence did Julius Caesar have on biblical history?

Julius Caesar is not mentioned in the Bible, nor did he live during the times recorded in the Bible, having died in 44 BC. However, Julius Caesar did instigate the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire, which was led by a strong emperor/dictator. The Caesars who followed in his wake played a significant role in persecution of the early church. A short summary of Roman history and of Julius Caesar's career will be helpful:

For hundreds of years, Rome had operated as a republic, led by the Senate made up of representatives of the people from the upper class. In those days, cities (not countries) often wielded the most power, and the city of Rome had conquered much of the known world. (It would be as if Washington, D.C., were an independent city that gradually gained enough economic and military might to conquer the whole American continent.) People who lived within the Roman Empire were conquered people, subject to a foreign power, namely, the city of Rome. One of the secrets of Rome's power was its mighty legions and the generals that commanded them.

Julius Caesar was an ambitious general with many victories to his name. He was also a politician who sought to parlay his popularity into real power. At that time there were two other generals/politicians in similar positions, Pompey and Crassus. With the death of Crassus, Pompey aligned himself with the Senate, who ordered Julius to retire and return to Rome alone. Julius, realizing that this would leave him vulnerable, returned to Rome with his 13th Legion, and civil war erupted. When all was settled, Julius Caesar was firmly in control of Rome. Although he was not officially designated Emperor at the time, later historians consider him the first Roman Emperor, and the family name Caesar

became the title of the Emperor, as one who followed in the steps of Julius Caesar.

Julius Caesar was assassinated on March 15, 44 BC, by a group of senators led by Brutus and Cassius (two who are familiar to students of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar). A new round of civil war erupted. The forces of Julius's friend Mark Antony and his grand-nephew Octavius defeated forces loyal to Brutus and Cassius at Philippi. Antony had intended to seize power, but Julius had adopted and designated Octavius as his successor, as he had no living legitimate children according to Roman law. Forces loyal to Octavius defeated the forces of Antony (and his partner, Cleopatra) at Actium, leaving Octavius as the sole military power. However, he still had to court political and popular support, which he did aggressively. Throughout his life Octavius was granted more and more power. In 27 BC, he was granted the title Augustus, and although there were many legal, political, and constitutional limits to his power, he was for all practical purposes a dictator. The Caesars who followed Augustus became increasingly despotic. Some of them, including Augustus Caesar, are mentioned in the New Testament.

It is Julius Caesar's immediate heir that is mentioned in the famous nativity story: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world" (Luke 2:1).

Augustus was followed by his adopted stepson Tiberius, who is mentioned in Luke 3:1. John the Baptist entered his ministry in the thirteenth year of the reign of Tiberius.

Tiberius was followed by Caligula, who is not mentioned in the New Testament. Caligula was the great-nephew of Augustus on his father's side and the nephew of Tiberius on his mother's side.

Caligula was followed by Claudius Caesar, the uncle of Tiberius. Claudius is mentioned in Acts 18:2. Priscilla and Aquila left Italy because the Emperor Claudius has expelled all Jews from Rome.

The final Emperor who could claim any kinship to Julius Caesar was Nero, who is not mentioned by name in the New Testament but was the Emperor in power when Paul made his appeal to Caesar (Acts 25:10-11). From extrabiblical sources we know of Nero's intense persecution of Christians.

Even though Julius Caesar is not mentioned in Scripture, and even though he did not live during any of the times covered by the biblical narrative, his ambition set in motion the events that changed the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. The whole New Testament is colored by the historical and cultural background of the Roman Empire, starting with Julius Caesar and his successors. The New Testament church took a stand against the cult surrounding the Roman Emperor, who was often considered to be deity or quasi-deity. The central Christian confession "Jesus is Lord" is a refutation of the central creed of the Roman Empire, "Caesar is Lord." Although Augustus bore the title "son of the deified one" (a reference to Julius), it was during the reign of Augustus that the true Son of God was actually born on earth. Tiberius, as Emperor, was the head of the Roman religion, but the Word of God bypassed him and came to a lowly prophet named John, preaching in the wilderness. And, finally, it was the Roman Emperors with aspirations of deity who were often the strongest persecutors of Christians in the early church. It was the ambition of Julius Caesar that paved the way for one man (the Caesar) to rule the Roman Empire with an iron fist and to interpret Christian fidelity to Jesus as Lord as treasonous.

Julius Caesar was a trend-setter and model for many Caesars who followed, and the impact he had on the Roman world greatly affected the church and the spread of the gospel.