What is the significance of the Roman Empire in biblical history?

The Roman Empire was the human political entity that God used to prepare the world for the birth of the Messiah and for the spread of the gospel.

At the end of the Old Testament, Israel had returned from exile, Jerusalem had been rebuilt, and the temple had been reconstructed and was functioning again. The world power was the Median (or Medo-Persian) Empire. In the 400 years between the testaments, the Greek Empire rose to prominence under Alexander and then splintered upon his death. Israel was persecuted by the Seleucids, one of the splinter kingdoms of the Greek Empire based in Syria. The Seleucid ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes ("manifest god") was especially brutal. He enforced Hellenization of the Jews and profaned the temple. His actions led to the Maccabean revolt in which Israel expelled the Greeks and gained their independence.

During the time of revolt, the Maccabees were supported by the up-and-coming Romans (1 Maccabees 8; 15:15-24). As the power of Rome grew, it became an empire and swallowed up Israel. The Jews were allowed to maintain their religious practices as long as they did not make trouble for Rome. Rome placed a series of puppet kings (the Herod family) and military governors (e.g., Pilate, Felix, Festus) over various provinces of Israel.

Although Scripture prophesied centuries before that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), Mary and Joseph were firmly established in Nazareth of Galilee (Luke 1:26). The Roman Empire moved them to the city where Christ was to be born. A decree of the Roman Emperor Augustus (Octavian) mandated that all should return to their home for registration so "So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to

Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child" (Luke 2:4-5). God used the decree of a pagan emperor to move Mary and Joseph into the place that had been prophesied. Certainly, Mary and Joseph could have chosen to go to Bethlehem on their own in order to fulfill the prophecy; however, the Roman emperor's decree that set everything in motion demonstrated that Mary and Joseph did not manipulate events to "set up their son" as a potential Messiah.

One of the priorities of the Roman Empire (perhaps the main priority) was peace, which it accomplished with an iron hand. The Pax Romana ("peace of Rome") guaranteed that people could live and travel within the Roman Empire in relative safety. Roads were constructed that made travel much easier, and a common language broke down communication barriers among various ethnic groups and provided something of a common culture. The apostle Paul traveled all over the Roman Empire on Roman roads and shared the gospel with diverse groups of Gentiles in the common Greek language. (The common trade language of the Roman Empire was Greek and was not replaced with Latin for several centuries.) Paul's Roman citizenship allowed him to move about the empire more freely and provided him with an additional measure of protection (see Acts 22:22-29). Not only Paul, but many Christians spread out all over the Roman Empire, taking the gospel with them.

It is commonly accepted that Rome was the primary persecutor of the church in the first century, but an examination of the evidence in the New Testament does not bear this out. Widespread persecution by the Romans did not occur until the time of Nero (the late 60s) and later emperors. The observable pattern in the New Testament is that Rome cared very little about Christians and only took action against them at the instigation of the Jewish authorities (see Acts 22:30). Rome often attempted to placate the Jewish

authorities to keep the peace. The Roman governor Pilate wanted to release Jesus, but the Jewish authorities demanded His execution (Matthew 27:15-23). Likewise, Paul was most often opposed by his own countrymen who either took things into their own hands, stirred up the pagan populace, or appealed to the Roman authorities for help. This happened at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9) and at Corinth (Acts 18:12-17). The one time when Paul was arrested by the Roman authorities, he used his status as a Roman citizen to gain an apology upon his release (Acts 16:35-40).

When Paul was spotted in the Jerusalem temple, it was his countrymen who attacked him and the Roman authorities who arrested/rescued him (Acts 21:27-36). The Roman governor saved Paul from a plot by the Jews to kill him (Acts 23). Both Felix and Festus, Roman governors, are presented as being sympathetic to Paul but unwilling to release him because it would anger the Jewish leadership (Acts 24-26.) Ultimately, Paul appealed to Caesar, for he knew he could not get a fair trial in Jerusalem. In the final analysis, the Roman governor Festus and the Roman puppet king Agrippa agreed: "This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment" (Acts 26:31).

The Roman authorities demanded absolute allegiance to Rome first and foremost. Because of the Jews' longstanding "tradition" of monotheism, they were exempted from offering sacrifices to the emperor. Initially, Christians were considered members of a sect of Judaism and were given the same exemption. However, Jews began to more forcefully distance themselves from Christians, and Rome started to take a harder look at Christians. By the second century, Christians were persecuted as enemies of the state because of their refusal to honor the emperor as a deity. However, this persecution is not evident within the pages of the New Testament.

In AD 70, the Roman general Titus (son of Emperor Vespasian) laid waste to Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in fulfillment of Jesus' pronouncement in Luke 21:6.

Three Roman emperors are mentioned by name in the New Testament. Augustus, already mentioned above in connection with the census that moved Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem for Jesus' birth. Tiberius, who was emperor when John the Baptist started his public ministry (Luke 3:1). And Claudius is mentioned as the emperor who expelled all Jews from Rome (Acts 18:1). The Roman historian Seutonius is his work The Lives of the Twelve Caesars says that the expulsion was the result of Jewish disputes over someone called Chrestus. Many scholars believe that this may be a reference to Christ. Most Roman authorities were uninterested and uninformed with the particulars of Jewish disputes (see Acts 25:18-20), so it is understandable that they might get the name wrong. Within a few years, the Jews had returned to Rome.

In summary, the Roman Empire had a tremendous impact in the circumstances regarding Jesus' birth and crucifixion, and unintentionally provided the necessary infrastructure to allow the apostles to spread the gospel throughout the Mediterranean world.