

What was a Roman legion?

A Roman legion was a large division of soldiers in the ancient Roman army. The number of warriors in a legion varied throughout Roman history, from 3,000 to 7,000. In the time of Jesus, a standard Roman legion consisted of about 6,000 men. These legions were the elite soldiers of the Roman army.

The Greek word *legiōn* meant “army” or “camp.” Originally, to belong to a legion, a soldier had to be a Roman citizen and property owner, but these requirements were relaxed at times when troops were needed. Members of this military unit possessed a variety of skills. The bulk of a Roman legion was made up of foot soldiers or infantrymen. Some served as swordsmen and others as combat specialists and supporting troops. Each legion also contained a unit of 120 cavalry or horsemen.

A legion had about 60 centurions (Matthew 8:5; 27:27; John 18:3; Acts 21:31), one to command each century, a grouping of roughly 100 soldiers. Various centuries were grouped into cohorts, each representing about 500 soldiers. Over the centurions were six tribunes, and leading the entire legion was the legate, a senator appointed by the Emperor.

During the time of the Roman Republic (506 – 27 BC), all male Romans citizens age 17–46 were required by law to be available to serve in the Roman army for a period of up to six years. However, by the start of the Roman Empire (27 BC), Augustus Caesar brought about changes that created a more professional, long-serving army.

Soldiers in a Roman legion served under respectable conditions. They received regular pay, periodic bonuses, and compensation at the time of release. Living accommodations

were often better than what the men experienced outside of the army, with permanent forts that included basic amenities and even bathhouses. Soldiers were well-fed and provided with clothing, equipment, and medical care by the state. Members of Roman legions were considered persons of importance in society and, once discharged from service, were usually able to live comfortably.

In the New Testament, the word legion is never used in a military sense. Because a legion represented a large body of men, the word took on symbolic significance, meaning “a multitude” or “a vast number.” It appears four times in the New Testament.

One day, as Jesus arrived in the land of the Gerasenes, He encountered a violent man tormented by demons in his body and mind. These demons empowered the man with strength enough to break apart the chains that shackled him. The man cried out constantly and cut himself with stones. Jesus asked the demon to identify himself, and he replied, “My name is Legion . . . for we are many” (Mark 5:9). Jesus cast the army of demons out from the man and into a herd of about two thousand pigs, which then drowned in the nearby sea.

At the time of His arrest, Jesus told the disciple who had cut off the soldier’s ear to put away his sword: “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” (Matthew 26:53-54).

As the Son of God, Jesus demonstrated that He has the power to drive out the most violent multitude of demons and the authority to command vast armies of angels to come to His aid.