

## What is the significance of the city of Rome in the Bible?

<https://www.gotquestions.org/Rome-in-the-Bible.html>

Rome is not mentioned in the Old Testament but figures prominently in the New Testament. Although the city of Rome is not often directly mentioned, every place and event in the New Testament has Roman rule as its background.

Rome came to prominence in what is called the intertestamental period—the roughly 400 years between Old and New Testaments. During that time Israel was under the thumb of Greek rulers, gained independence for a brief period of time, and then came under the control of the Roman Empire. The city of Rome ruled most of the Mediterranean world at that time. Within the empire there were citizens of Rome, who had special protections, and then everyone else, who were more or less conquered peoples and did not have the same protections. Simply living within the borders of the Roman Empire did not make one a citizen of Rome.

It was a decree from Rome, by Emperor Caesar Augustus, that moved Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in time for Jesus to be born there, thereby fulfilling prophecy (Luke 2:1-6; Micah 5:2). Herod the Great, who slaughtered the baby boys in and around Bethlehem (Matthew 2:16-18), had been placed on the throne by the Roman emperor. Jesus and His disciples had regular interaction with Roman soldiers stationed in Jerusalem and throughout Palestine. Jesus healed a centurion's servant and held him up as a model of true faith (Luke 7:1-10).

When the Jewish leaders finally determined to put Jesus to death, they had to enlist the help of the Roman authorities. Pilate was the Roman governor who finally pronounced the

death sentence. The Jewish authorities pressured him into doing it by questioning his allegiance to Caesar: "Pilate tried to set Jesus free, but the Jewish leaders kept shouting, 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar.' When Pilate heard this, he brought Jesus out and sat down on the judge's seat. . . . 'Here is your king,' Pilate said to the Jews. But they shouted, 'Take him away! Take him away! Crucify him!' 'Shall I crucify your king?' Pilate asked. 'We have no king but Caesar,' the chief priests answered. Finally Pilate handed him over to them to be crucified" (John 19:12-16).

Later, Paul traveled to Rome for his trial before Caesar. He did not plant the church in Rome, but his most thorough explanation of the gospel is in his Epistle to the Romans. That letter served as his introduction to the church at Rome, who had only heard about him but had never met him personally or heard him preach.

The stability that Rome brought to the world allowed for the efficient spread of the gospel. Under Rome, there was a common language that facilitated spreading the message. Rome built an extensive road system that made travel easier and thus further enabled the gospel to be spread. And, finally, because of Roman rule, crime was at an all-time low for the period, and thus travel was safer for the apostles and missionaries of the first century.

For Rome, a primary objective was to keep the peace in its conquered territories. People were allowed a great deal of freedom in what they believed and what religious practices they followed, as long as their first allegiance was to Rome and to the Emperor. People in the Roman Empire were required to offer sacrifices to the gods of Rome and/or the Emperor. As long as they did this, they could also offer sacrifices to other gods of

their choice. This was a problem for Jews and Christians, however. Because of the Jews' longstanding tradition of monotheism, Rome allowed Jews an exemption. As long as Christianity was considered a subset of Judaism, it was exempt as well. However, as Jewish leaders began to denounce Christians, the followers of Jesus lost their legal protection. In effect, the Jewish religious leaders used the Roman Empire to carry out persecution. Throughout most of the book of Acts, it seems that Christians are not in the crosshairs of the Roman authorities, but Jews and pagans often appeal to Roman authorities to stifle the Christian message. In Paul's case, his Roman citizenship actually saved him from the plots of some zealous Jews (Acts 23:30-25:7).

Rome is not mentioned by name in Revelation, but it is alluded to. In Revelation 17, Babylon the harlot is seen riding on a beast having seven heads and ten horns (verse 7). The seven heads are identified as seven hills (verse 9). No one in the ancient world could have missed this reference to Rome, which was known for being built on seven hills. In the vision of Revelation 17, Rome is not the instigator of persecution so much as the instrument that is used by the woman Babylon to persecute the saints. This follows the pattern that can be observed in the Gospels and Acts.

Rome continued (and continues) to be significant in church history and in the history of Western civilization, especially with the political and religious influence of the Roman Catholic Church.