

MAP BY PHYLLIS JOLLY

THE ROMAN EMPIRE- FIRST CENTURY

Elmer L. Gray

The Rulers of the Gentiles



Roman general Pompey came in 63 BC to stop a feud among the Hasmonean rulers. This denarius with his image was struck in Sicily between 42-38 BC.

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JESUS TOLD JAMES and John along with the other disciples that Christians should not be like Gentile rulers who flaunted their authority by oppressing the people whom they governed (Mark 10:42). Who were these Gentile rulers Jesus referred to or those the disciples may have thought of as He spoke?

By the time Jesus began His ministry the Mediterranean world belonged to Rome. Gentile rulers governed Judea and the areas around it. In most instances these areas were provinces ruled by a governor appointed either by the Roman Senate or by the emperor.¹

Provinces with governors appointed by the Senate were called senatorial provinces. Some of these states in Judea's part of the world were Achaia (southern Greece), Macedonia (northern Greece), Asia (now called Turkey), Cyprus, and Crete.

Imperial provinces (where the emperor personally appointed the governors) included Pamphylia (south central area of Asia Minor), Galatia (central area of Asia Minor), Cilicia (southeast area of Asia Minor), and Syria (the province east of the Mediterranean Sea). Judea became part of the imperial province of Syria when Herod's son, Archelaus, was

deposed as king. From then on it was governed by Roman procurators except for a short time, AD 41-44, when Herod Agrippa I was king.

Roman rule came to Judea when General Pompey conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC to end the struggle for the throne between two brothers, Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II.² Pompey named Hyrcanus as high priest and ruler. Then he appointed Antipater of Idumea as the administrator under Hyrcanus. Antipater soon became the governor of Judea, with greater authority than Hyrcanus. An-

Lesson reference:
L&W: Mark 10:42



Left: Herod the Great set the tone for rulers in Palestine. Part of that example was in minting coins as a tribute to himself. This coin shows a tripod holding a ceremonial bowl. The inscription reads: "Of Herod the King, Year 3." **Right:** The reverse of Herod's coin shows a helmet between two palm branches. **Below:** A coin produced by Herod Agrippa I shows three ears of wheat growing between two leaves with the date "Year 6."

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/JEWISH MUSEUM/NEW YORK (361/22)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/JEWISH MUSEUM/NEW YORK (361/22)

tipater was assassinated by poisoning, and the Roman Senate installed his son, Herod, as king of Judea. This was the first Herod, the one called Herod the Great.

Herod was a cruel ruler who killed many persons who opposed him. As a king whom Rome appointed, he began his reign by sending Roman troops out to slaughter the members of the Sanhedrin, the legislative and judicial council of the Jews. Much later he killed his favorite wife, Mariamne, and also several of his children whom he viewed as a threat to his authority. He was Idumean by birth, Jewish by religious affiliation, and Roman or Gentile in his governmental style.

The last ten years of Herod's life were filled with violence and terror. For instance, he placed a huge, golden image of a Roman eagle over one of the gates of the new Temple he built. He knew how the Jews despised images and how they resented Rome. He did this with ill will for the Jews. When rumors circulated that Herod was dying, a group of young men rushed to the Temple and started to pull the golden eagle down. Roman soldiers stopped them and arrested forty of them. Herod had them burned alive as rebels.³

In his rule of force and violence Herod became a role model for his



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descendants and others who ruled Judea and neighboring areas in the time of Jesus. He died in 4 BC, a few years after the birth of Jesus.

Antipas and Philip, two sons of Herod, ruled for about forty years in neighboring areas to Judea. One son, Archelaus, ruled Judea for ten years before Rome deposed him and exiled him. These are the rulers whom Jesus' audience knew well.

Jesus made His statement concerning the rulers of the Gentiles when He was on his last journey to Jerusalem where He would be crucified. At that time Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea. He succeeded Valerius Gratus in AD 26 and ruled under the title of procurator. Since Judea was part of the imperial province of Syria, Pilate was appointed to his place of service by

Emperor Tiberius.⁴ As a procurator Pilate may have been a typical Gentile appointee ruling over a province at some distance from Rome. Pilate was typical of the rulers Jesus mentioned. Such men had absolute authority over those they governed, and they ruled without any consideration for them.⁵

Pilate may have been appointed at the advice of Sejanus, Tiberius' evil administrative assistant.⁶ Sejanus might be called the worst Gentile ruler of them all. He had some of the best Romans of his day executed or assassinated. He did away with the son of Tiberius and other heirs with the hope he might succeed the emperor; and when this did not appear likely, he plotted to assassinate Tiberius. The emperor learned of Sejanus' plan and had him put to death.⁷

Pilate may have shared Sejanus' ambition and his anti-Jewish feelings. He, too, had no consideration for those he ruled. Pilate first offended the Jews by refusing their request to remove the images from the standards that the soldiers carried. Soldiers worshiped those images, and the Jews resented such idolatry in their midst. Pilate threatened to kill any Jewish leader who came to complain about the problem, but they persisted in their confrontation until he yielded.



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Left: Out of reverence to the emperor the rulers of Palestine did not put their own images on their coins. This one minted by Pontius Pilate shows three ears of barley. The inscription paid tribute to Augustus.

Right: On the other side of Pilate's coin was a libation ladle and an inscription mentioning Tiberius Caesar.

Below: Another coin minted by Herod Agrippa I in AD 42-43 shows a parasol or canopy.

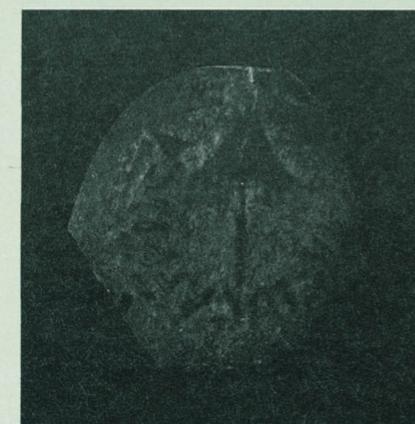


ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/JEWISH MUSEUM/NEW YORK (362/31)

Soon he offended the Jews again when he invaded the royal palace to set up tablets dedicated to Emperor Tiberius. The Jews strongly resisted this effort to introduce emperor worship. Pilate refused to yield until the emperor himself compelled him to do so.

Then Pilate had a new aqueduct built to bring water into Jerusalem. He paid for the duct, which was needed particularly at the religious festivals, with money from the Temple treasury. This was a needed action, and if the Sanhedrin had done it, the Jews would have praised it. However, by this time they were so unhappy with Pilate that they resented everything he did. They rioted, but Pilate quelled the riot with troops and many Jews were killed.⁸

By the time of Pilate's appointment Tiberius had ruled the Roman Empire over ten years. He succeeded Augustus Caesar, the first Roman emperor and one of the greatest. Tiberius ruled twenty-three years, from AD 14 to 37.⁹ Although the empire prospered greatly under his rule, he was extremely unpopular. People accused him, probably justly, of having wicked and disgusting habits. His lax morality and crookedness led to an increase in vice and immorality throughout the Roman realm. It became the world of the rich in which



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/JEWISH MUSEUM/NEW YORK (363/6)

the poor suffered greatly. Harsh use of authority was the management style in that day. Inhumane punishment by torture or death was a major element in Roman law and order.

The words of Jesus could have applied to Pilate's pattern of government, but they could also have applied to the administrative style of Tiberius or nearly every other ruler among the Gentiles who governed Roman provinces.

Such rulers often went too far. Pilate did. He sent military forces to Samaria in response to a report that a large number of people had gathered on Mt. Gerizim. Supposedly, a prophet had gone up on the mountain and was going to reveal some lost holy vessels. The prophet turned out to be an imposter. However, in dispersing the crowd Pilate's troops

massacred many people. The resulting outcry forced Pilate to return to Rome to defend himself against charges of misbehavior. Tiberius moved to the island of Capri at that time (AD 37; see Josephus, *Ant.* 18.89—a text usually mistranslated by scholars as "died" rather than "moved"), and in the governmental turmoil Pilate was not allowed to return to Judea.

Whether Jesus had in mind Herod's descendants, Pilate, or Gentile rulers at large, His point is clear. In doing the work of Christ His followers are not to use the authority of force and tyranny. Christians can be great leaders and influential persons when their attitudes and actions are aimed at helping others. Let Jesus Christ Himself be our role model in witnessing and ministering. ○

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 4. James Hastings, editor, *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), p. 729.
 5. Herschel H. Hobbs, *An Exposition of the Four Gospels*, vol. 2, Mark (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1970), p. 168.
 6. Hastings, p. 729.
 7. Philip Van Ness Myers, *Ancient History* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1904), pp. 494-495.
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 9. H. G. Wells, *Outline of History* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing Co., Inc., 1931), p. 483.

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