

FIRST-CENTURY
Armor

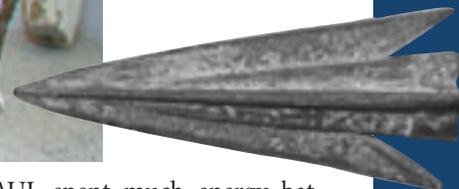
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Left: In the museum at the ruins of ancient Hippo, a bas-relief from a sarcophagus, showing soldiers engaged in hand-to-hand combat.
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Below: Bronze arrowhead, probably fired from a catapult.
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ROMAN LEGIONARY AND CENTURION

First Century A.D.

The legionary (shown on the left) was the basic foot soldier of the Roman army. Whereas the Greek *hoplite* was a spearman, the legionary was a swordsman. Fighting with both shield and sword, legionaries preferred close-order combat. The legionaries would hurl their javelins as a shock-missile weapon to break up the charge and the order of an enemy formation. As the javelin (the *pilum*) punched through the enemies' shields, the soft iron point and shank would buckle and bend, making it impossible to extract. The shield, thus useless, would have been discarded—leaving the warrior defenseless except for his spear or sword. The legionaries quickly drew their short swords, called the *gladius*, and in a horrific collision with their metal-reinforced wooden and leather-covered shields, the points of their swords began reaping a bloody harvest. The legionaries pushed and punched with their shields, knocking the enemy off balance, while the wicked points of their swords would plunge into the unprotected

faces or soft bellies of the shieldless men.

The legionary was both well-armored and well-armed. The type of iron helmet was adopted from the Gauls in the late first century B.C. Legionaries of special rank would wear feather plums or horsehair crests as shown. By the early first century A.D., the legions began wearing a highly flexible, highly protective chest armor known as the *lorica segmentata*. Made of several plates and strips of iron, this type of armor gave better protection against arrows and wild slashing downward blows. Other type of body protection could be a coat of chain mail or scale mail. The pride of any legionary was his belt. Highly decorative and exquisitely made, the belt helped hold the sword scabbard in place and jingled as he walked and moved about. Attached to the belt would be a dagger, called the *pugio*, used as a secondary weapon if the sword was lost or broken. To give the legionary a firm footing, the soldier wore the *caligae* or Roman boot. Wearing shoes made of

thick tough leather and hobnailed on the soles, the legionary gained a strong foothold in any environment.

The centurions (shown on the right) were the backbone of the legion. These men generally rose through the ranks. The centurion's authority was visible by his transverse horsehair crest on his helmet and the vine-stick he carried while not in battle. These men led the troops in battle by personal example. A centurion would command a total of 80 men, the size of a century. The most desired position of any centurion was *primipilus*, or "first spear" of the elite first cohort. This cohort was double-sized and would lead the vanguard into every battle. The arms and armor of a centurion differed only slightly from the legionary's. The centurion wore his sword on the left side, not the right, as did the legionary. Instead of the metal *lorica segmentata*, centurions would wear a coat of chain or scale mail, usually finely made. As another mark of rank, centurions wore metal greaves below their knees for leg protection.

PAUL spent much energy battling opponents, both physical and spiritual, as he carried the gospel to new areas. He often experienced persecution from local residents, but he also faced powers that were spiritual in nature.¹

Rather than passively accepting whatever came in the spiritual realm, Paul realized he and other believers had to take an active role in standing against Satan and his evil forces. To describe how a Christian might battle evil forces, Paul spoke in terms of the spiritual armor.² Since the concept of a full complement of spiritual armor was unique to Paul at the time of writing, what provided the sources for his ideas?

Sources for Paul's Usage of Armor

Paul's first source for the armor imagery likely included the Old Testament.³ Isaiah had referred to righteousness as a belt around the waist of the Messiah who would strike the earth in judgment (Isa. 11:1-5). He also had referred to the feet of those who bring good news of peace through preaching the gospel message (52:7). Isaiah's description has distinct similarities to the shoes in Paul's spiritual armor, but Isaiah did not

LESSON REFERENCE

FBS: Ephesians 6:10-20

directly connect the shoes to those of a soldier. In Isaiah 59:17, the prophet mentioned a breastplate of righteousness and a helmet of salvation the Lord wore as He prepared to judge His people.

Isaiah's references to spiritual armor almost certainly provided the background for Paul's concepts of spiritual armor. However, a few differences existed between Isaiah's and Paul's descriptions. In Isaiah, the two definite references to armor speak of God wearing the armor. Paul, however, applied the spiritual armor to the Christian. Though Isaiah mentioned some pieces of armor, Paul brought together an entire suit of armor the Christian should wear. He expanded the Old Testament imagery that Isaiah had begun.

In addition to the Old Testament, Paul used his firsthand knowledge of soldiers to develop the imagery of the spiritual armor. Under God's inspiration Paul observed the outfit of the Roman soldier and conveyed a spiritual message. What kind of soldiers did Paul encounter that might have added to his armor imagery?

Four Classes of Soldiers

In Paul's day, the Roman army contained four classes of soldiers.⁴ The first class, known as *velites*, included the youngest and poorest of the soldiers. They fought on the front lines and were lightly armored, considering their position on the battlefield. The second class, or *hastati*, fought behind the *velites*. They were the strongest and most heavily armed forces. The *principes* included the most capable soldiers in the prime of their careers. They provided the third line of defense for the army. The final line, the *triarii*, included the oldest soldiers and were considerably smaller in number than the other divisions. They provided a connection to the army's central command. According to descriptions of the armor of the *hastati*, Paul probably had these soldiers in mind as he referred to the spiritual armor (Eph. 6:10-20).

A Soldier's Armor in Paul's Day

Polybius described the equipment of the *hastati*.⁵ His weapon list included a large shield, a sword hanging on the right side, two spears, a brass helmet, a brass breastplate, and greaves (or leg protection below the knees). Soldiers who came from the higher classes had a coat of mail underneath their breastplates. Polybius's list of armor pieces differs little from the one Herodotus recorded about 300 years earlier.⁶ The only difference in the two lists was that Herodotus failed to mention the greaves. These panoplies (or whole sets of armor) were such a standard issue that some city-states presented their young men with armor at the age of manhood, expecting that they would serve in the military.⁷ Panoplies carried great value, and sometimes kings received as many as 300 sets of armor as a spoil of war.⁸ Paul mentioned all of the pieces of armor except the spears and the greaves, and he added shoes and belt to his pieces of spiritual armor.

Paul first mentioned the belt of truth (v. 14). A soldier wore two belts, the first underneath the armor. This belt gathered the tunic so movement was possible without hindrances from the undergarment.⁹ The second belt fit over the outside armor and held the sword. Both belts functioned as a piece of armor that held all the others in place. Paul used truth as the piece of armor that held all the others in place.

Next, Paul described the breastplate of righteousness (v. 14). Polybius had earlier described the breastplate as the armor that protected the heart.¹⁰ Some soldiers in that day wore segmented armor, while others wore a one-piece breastplate made of brass.¹¹ Paul probably intended the latter when he wrote Ephesians. Righteousness was the armor Paul saw as covering the heart.

Paul added the shoes in his list of armor pieces (v. 15). Josephus described the soldier's shoes as thickly studded leather-soled shoes.¹² Their main purpose was to create a solid foundation for the soldier so he

would not slide when fighting on a hillside. They also provided limited protection from the weather. As the shoes provided a solid foundation that allowed the soldier to go to battle, the spiritual shoes prepared the Christian warrior to share the message of the gospel.



The shield of faith referred to a wooden shield covered with calf skin. The shield was large, four-by-two-and-one-half-feet.¹³ In his *Iliad* Homer mentioned these shields containing an ox hide covering.¹⁴ The shield served a specific purpose—it extinguished burning arrows that embedded themselves between the layers, where the lack of oxygen would snuff out the flames. Paul picturesquely described this function of the shield as extinguishing all the flaming arrows of the evil one (v. 16).

The helmet Paul described was probably a large, one-piece bowl with a front guard, cheek pieces, and neck guard.¹⁵ Most helmets contained a feather or crest piece (up to 18 inches tall) designed to make the soldier appear taller and thus more intimidating. The helmet obviously protected the head. One of the spiritual enemy's main targets is the mind. Paul envisioned salvation as a protective armor against the enemy's assaults (v. 17).

Left: A Roman centurion made of basalt, from the early Roman period.

Right: Bronze Roman helmet with a peak-like projection at the back of the neck, believed to be Celtic in origin.

This type helmet was popular among the legions. Many of this type have been found at Montefortino in northern Italy.

Below: Relief depicting Roman soldiers, first century A.D.

Paul last mentioned the sword of the Spirit (v. 17). He did not mention the two spears all soldiers included in their armor.¹⁶ They threw the larger spears prior to the hand-to-hand combat, which they fought using the smaller sword. The sword was double-edged and worn on the outside belt. Paul saw this sword as the Word of God the Spirit used to defeat the enemy. Without this piece of armor, soldiers had no chance when under direct attack.

As he remained in prison, writing to the Ephesians, Paul had a constant reminder of the soldiers' armor. Though his bodyguard probably did not wear full battle armor, Paul probably encountered many soldiers who did. As he sat in prison

without the opportunity to go and share his faith, he did have the opportunity to pray. Thus, Paul concluded his discussion of spiritual armor with an encouragement to pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests (v. 18). Either he believed that the Christian soldier put on the armor through prayer or that prayer was the primary battleground for spiritual warfare. Perhaps Paul intended both meanings.

In summary, Paul expanded on Old Testament warfare imagery to describe the armor a Christian needs to fight spiritual battles. He utilized his knowledge of the armor worn by the *hastati* soldiers because they were the most heavily armed. He envisioned the spiritual soldier fitting the armor in place through prayer and then engaging the enemies of God not in one's own strength but in the power the Lord provides through the full spiritual armor (vv. 10-11). **B**



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1. Second Corinthians 11:21-29 describes Paul's physical opponents, but Ephesians 6:10-20 describes his battles against spiritual forces of darkness.

2. Ephesians 6:10-20.

3. See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians in Word Biblical Commentary*, gen. eds. David A. Hubbard and Glen W. Barker (Dallas: Word Books Publishers, 1990), 436, for a survey of the Old Testament armor motif.

4. H. M. D. Parker, *The Roman Legions* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1928), 14.

5. Polybius, *Polybius: The Histories* trans. W. R. Paton (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6.23. Polybius was a Roman historian who died about 122 B.C.

6. Herodotus, *The History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 7.91.

7. Diodorus Siculus, Books XIX.66-XX, trans. Russell M. Greer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 20.84.3.

8. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. C. F. Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 3.114.

9. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians in The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 473.

10. Polybius.

11. John Warry, *Warfare in the Classical World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), 191; see also Peter Connolly, *Greece and Rome at War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1998), 108-109.

12. Josephus, *War of the Jews, The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston (Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co., n.d.), 6.1.8.

13. Polybius.

14. Homer, *Iliad, The Loeb Classical Library, Books 1-12*, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 5;452.

15. Michael P. Speidel, *Riding for Caesar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 106.

16. Polybius.

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