

## ***The Background to Paul's Teaching on Authority***

The most likely date for the writing of the book of Romans is 57 A.D. For much of the second temple period, there were three major schools of thought in Judaism: the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the Essenes. But in the year 6 A.D., a fourth philosophy arose called the Zealots. It began with a tax revolt led by Judas of Galilee in response to the Roman census ordered by the governor Quirinius. Their ideology was based on the biblical concept of “zeal” for the Torah (Law), drawing inspiration from figures like Phinehas in the Bible and the Maccabees.

Over the following decades, the movement grew through guerrilla warfare and political agitation, eventually leading to more radical factions. During the decade of the 50s A.D., a splinter group known as the *Sicarii* (“dagger-men”) emerged. They used small daggers (*sicae*) concealed under their cloaks to assassinate Roman officials and so-called Jewish “collaborators” in broad daylight, especially during crowded festivals. Their first high-profile victim was the High Priest Jonathan (around 56 A.D.), which contributed to a “reign of terror” in Jerusalem.

In 58 A.D., one year after Paul wrote his letter to the Roman believers, Acts 21:38 tells us that during Paul’s final visit to Jerusalem, the Roman commander mistook Paul for “the Egyptian” who had recently led 4,000 *Sicarii* into the wilderness. English Bibles might read “assassins” or “murderers,” but it is a specific reference to this organized group of zealots called the *Sicarii*.<sup>1</sup> Afterward, the political climate would continue to deteriorate, which eventually led to the Great Jewish Revolt in 66 A.D., followed by the overwhelming Roman response that resulted in the destruction of the temple four years later.

Ultimately, this was an intense clash of cultures. The *Sicarii* held an obsessive attachment to liberty, believing that God was their only Ruler and that paying taxes to the pagan emperor was a form of idolatry. In contrast, this period was marked by increasingly ruthless Roman governors like Antonius Felix and Porcius Festus that we read about in the book of Acts.

Roman oppression in Judea was characterized by economic exploitation, religious provocation, and extreme military brutality. They practiced economic exploitation through a tax system that was a crushing burden on the Jewish peasantry. The Romans used periodic censuses to track property and population for taxation. To a religious Jew, this was seen as both a theft of God’s land and a badge of slavery. Rome auctioned off the right to collect taxes to private contractors known as *publicani* who were incentivized to extort as much as possible to turn a profit. Failure to pay taxes often led to the seizure of ancestral lands, creating a massive class of displaced, impoverished laborers who became easy recruits for revolutionary movements.

Roman governors often lacked sensitivity toward Jewish monotheism, viewing it as a nuisance or a threat. Governors like Pontius Pilate and Cumanus caused riots by bringing images of the Emperor into Jerusalem or seizing funds from the Temple treasury. Rome held the power to appoint and depose the Jewish High Priest, effectively turning the religious leadership into a puppet of the Roman administration.

As the Zealot movement grew, Roman governors responded with increasingly indiscriminate violence. Governors like Antonius Felix were known for crucifying thousands of suspected rebels and bandits without formal trials. Josephus records that later governors like Albinus and Gessius Florus were so corrupt that they essentially legalized crime by accepting bribes from gangs, further destabilizing the region and pushing the populace toward total revolt.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Acts 1:13 describes one of the twelve Apostles as being Simon the Zealot. Here, a different Greek term, *zelotes*, is used. This label could refer to his membership in this political party or simply his personal religious passion.

<sup>2</sup> *The Jewish War* 2.272–276; 2.277–283; 2.294–343; *Antiquities of the Jews* 20.11.1.

The presence of the Roman garrison at Antonia Fortress, which overlooked the Temple Mount, served as a constant, visible reminder of foreign occupation. The Roman soldiers' ability to intervene in religious festivals at a moment's notice created a permanent state of tension and fear.

The oppression of Rome significantly impacted Jewish communities in the Diaspora outside of Judea and the Galilee, through targeted financial penalties, civic demotions, and devastating communal violence. While Diaspora Jews had previously enjoyed unique religious protections and a high social status, the revolts in Judea turned them into targets for both the Roman state and their Gentile neighbors.

In major cities like Alexandria and Antioch, long-standing tensions between Jewish and Greek populations boiled over into state-sanctioned violence. Even before the Great Revolt, riots in Alexandria in 38 A.D. led the Roman governor Flaccus to declare Jews as being "aliens and foreigners," stripping them of their long-held residency rights. During the 66 A.D. revolt in Judea, similar riots in Alexandria resulted in the massacre of approximately 50,000 Jews. Roman and Greek intellectuals, such as Seneca and Tacitus, began writing more aggressively against Jewish customs, describing them as "base" or "xenophobic" and portraying Jews as enemies of humanity.<sup>3</sup>

Following the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, Emperor Vespasian imposed a punitive tax (*Fiscus Judaicus*) on all Jews throughout the empire, regardless of whether they had participated in the revolt. Formerly, Jewish men sent a voluntary half-shekel for the upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem. Rome made this tax mandatory but diverted the funds to the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome—an act of extreme religious humiliation. Under later emperors like Domitian, the tax was enforced with extreme rigor. Collectors even checked elderly men for circumcision to ensure no one was evading the tax.

It was in this turbulent setting that Paul wrote the book of Romans. His audience was located in the center of the empire's power. Paul's message to them, in a context of Roman oppression and Zealot agitation, especially in Romans chapters 12 and 13, was a radical, counter-cultural call that was intended to set them apart from everyone else in the region.

The Zealots were arguing that "zeal for God" required taking vengeance against Roman "pagans" and Jewish "traitors." Paul directly countered this by telling the Roman church: "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone" (v. 17). By stating, "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God" (v. 19), he was stripping the revolutionary movement of its theological justification.

If the believers in Rome—who were still largely viewed as a Jewish sect—had adopted a vengeful, revolutionary attitude, they would have been annihilated by the Roman guard long before the official persecutions began. Paul's instruction to "be at peace with everyone" (v. 18) was both a spiritual command and a practical survival strategy for a vulnerable minority.

The Zealots believed that victory came through a dagger. Paul redefined victory as moral and spiritual: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (v. 21). Instead of killing the enemy to end oppression, Paul suggests "burning coals" (v. 20)—a metaphor for using kindness to provoke a change of heart or a sense of shame in the oppressor. Each of these exhortations are an echo of the words of Yeshua spoken two and a half decades earlier in His Sermon on the Mount.

This teaching set the stage for Paul's most controversial exhortations of all in Romans 13—paying taxes and submitting to authorities. The key to understanding that chapter is recognizing, contextually, that the authorities in view were as cruel, oppressive and unrighteous as any group in modern history, if not more so.

---

<sup>3</sup> "On Superstition," in Augustine, *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)* 6.11.