

## Life in the Big City

By Mark E. Moore

Jesus' original band was a group of rural peasants. Incredibly, through the genius of Paul under the sovereign hand of God, this miniscule movement grew like mustard seed into an urban phenomenon that took the Roman world by storm. The book of Acts traces its contours, and the epistles spring from this metropolitan milieu. Therefore, if we are to fully grasp the New Testament, we simply must feel the pulse of the ancient city. We must be cautious here, however, for Roman cities are unlike any of their modern counterparts. Cities of the ancient world were much more akin to castles of the Middle Ages than a metroplex of America. We can not automatically assume that we understand them.

So we must ask, "What precisely is a city?" Well, the Old Testament seems to imply that an urban area must have walls to count as a city (Lev 25:31). The Rabbis would add that a kosher city should also include a synagogue, while Pausanias (10.4.1) would insist that it possess the standard Greek gymnasium, theater, marketplace, water supply, and other public buildings.<sup>1</sup> For our purposes we will simply define the ancient city as a place where the minority elite collect and administrate their assets (both human and material) through political, social, and religious buildings and services.

It works something like this. Virtually all the inhabitants were worker-bees for the benefit of the elite which comprised a mere one to two percent of the population. Another five percent could be considered a retainer class (officials, professional soldiers, and servants) who had access to the wealth of the elite.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of the people, however, lived barely above the subsistence level. "Cities were not commercial centers, they were not the locus of public agencies providing services to residents, nor were they the marketplace for the surrounding countryside. There were no

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rohrbaugh, "The City in the Second Testament," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 21 (1991) 68.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Taylor, "Cultural Anthropology as a Tool for Studying the New Testament," *Trinity Seminary Review* 18/1 (1996) 22.

suburbs for the upwardly mobile; and ghettos were located on the periphery or just outside the city walls rather than at the center.”<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the urban center controlled the hub of villages in their proximity as well as their surrounding lands which produced food and other consumable products (cf. Revelation 18:11-13). The city was the place for administrative control of those vast resources through economic, political, and religious administration. Inadvertently this led to the collection and homogenization of culture, art, language, and science. With that definition on the table, I invite you to journey with me back in time and take a walk through capital city of Rome<sup>4</sup> along with its 650,000 inhabitants.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Nature of the City**

As we approach the city on one of the excellent Roman roads,<sup>6</sup> we pass the tenement farms, large slave plantations, and the country villas of the rich, all constellations of the urban elite. The economic disparity is colossal. “A wealthy householder had more than seven hundred times the

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<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.* See also Gideon Sjoberg, *The Preindustrial City: Past and Present* (New York: Free Press, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> The Roman Empire spanned 3,000 miles east to west and 2,000 north to south, boasting some 50 million people (James Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1999] 142); although earlier estimates of the empire are upwards of 100,000,000. Only about 10% of these were actually Roman citizens. The 200 years of *pax romana* (“Roman peace” – never seen before or since), afforded the unprecedented opportunity to build nearly 1,200 Romanized cities all over the Mediterranean (I. G. Tucker, *Life in the Roman World* [New York: Macmillan, 1924] 30). Most of these would be quite small according to modern standards (five to ten thousand inhabitants). But there were a few giants even by conservative estimates: Rome – 650,000; Alexandria – 400,000; Ephesus – 200,000; Antioch – 150,000; Pergamum – 120,000; Sardis – 100,000; Corinth – 100,000; and Athens – 30,000.

<sup>5</sup> Most of the early estimates have Rome at over a million (cf. R. B. Edwards & M. Reasoner, “Rome Overview” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter [Downers Grove: IVP, 2000] 1013). This figure is disputed by a number of current scholars who would estimate Rome at a mere 200,000 (cf. Richard Rohrbaugh, “The Pre-Industrial City in Luke-Acts: Urban Social Relations,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jerome Neyrey [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991] 133 or Taylor 22).

<sup>6</sup> There were nearly 53,000 miles of Roman roads between Scotland and the Euphrates (Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993] 80). The two most prominent roads in Acts are the Appian Way, running from Rome to Brundisium on the Adriatic Coast and the Egnatian Way running from the west coast of Greece north to Byzantium. These paved roads, primarily built by Roman soldiers and paid for by local citizens, were made with three layers of different kinds of material, arched in the middle and trenched on each side to allow for drainage. Portions of these roads are still in existence today! See also Brian Rapske, “Acts, Travel and Shipwreck,” in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting*, ed. David Gill & Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

income of a peasant.”<sup>7</sup> If the rich can afford to, they will build a villa in the country to escape the noise, stress, and filth of the city. These villas generally come equipped with central heat, a swimming bath, library, works of art, and other “modern conveniences.”<sup>8</sup> Romans, as a general rule, have a strong preference for the country estate, but a home in the city is essential for political opportunities.

The ancient city is an intriguing place which we are now prepared to enter. But where are we to stay? Since commoners are not privy to the resources of the elite, they have to land in a “hotel.” They’re called inns and are nothing more than flea-infested brothels (Lk 10:34; Acts 28:15). If the insects don’t eat you alive, and if you can slither past the prostitutes, and if you aren’t rolled by one of the other guests, and if you don’t get cheated by the unscrupulous proprietor, you’ll probably have a pretty nice stay (cf. Petronius, *Sat.* 94.7). Fortunately for Christians like us, another option is developing. Through the hospitality of fellow believers, travelers can be hosted in a house church. The morality and danger of the inns make Christian hospitality of paramount importance (cf. Rom 16:23; 1 Pet 4:9; 2 John 10; 3 John 5-8; Heb 13:2; 1 Clement 10-12; *Didache* 11-13). Let’s go on in. Our host will be waiting just inside the city gate. As you gawk at the city with your chin in your chest for all its magnificence and squalor, let me orient you before you get lost.

### **The Physical Structure of the City**

The forum sits at the center of the city where the two main streets intersect (the *cardo*, N-S and the *decimus*, E-W). This is the where the action takes place. It is the political, educational, social, and commercial hub of the city. On a quick tour around the city, just to get our bearings, we will see amphitheaters, public baths, triumphal arches, bridges, fountains, aqueducts, sewage systems,

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<sup>7</sup> C. S. Keener, “Family and Household,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 353.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Malina, *The New Testament World* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2001) 84.

temples, basilicas and the like that comprise 25-30% of the public spaces in most Roman cities.<sup>9</sup> (Please excuse the graffiti – advertisers, vandals and political opportunists don't leave any white surface alone for long).<sup>10</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus said the three most significant contributions of Rome were aqueducts, paved roads and sewers.<sup>11</sup> Yet we probably should add concrete to that, for this new building material allowed for taller buildings, stronger bridges, and the vaulted arch, a staple of basilicas that dominated for the next 1,000 years.<sup>12</sup>

But all in Rome is not beautiful. The grandeur of the architecture is shrouded in filth, disease, crime, and overcrowding. Even the main streets are too narrow (16-21 feet) and choked with people, animals, vendors and fecal matter.<sup>13</sup> In fact, all but foot traffic is forbidden through the streets of Rome ten hours of the day, except, of course, for noble processions and construction carts.<sup>14</sup> Pigs, chickens, birds and dogs scour the trash left in the streets as well as the open sewage that runs through the gutters.<sup>15</sup> The smells of baking bread, fecal matter, rotting garbage, urine, smoke, unrefrigerated fish, and sweaty bodies are overpowering. At night public slaves walk the streets gathering corpses abandoned by their loved ones who can not afford a funeral (Horace, *Sat.* 1.8.8-16). Indeed, “Greco-Roman cities must have been smothered in flies, mosquitoes, and other

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<sup>9</sup> R. Macmullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974) 62f.

<sup>10</sup> In Pompey they whitewashed walls to serve as billboards for political endorsements, commercials and general graffiti. One such surface said, “I wonder, O wall, that you have not fallen in ruins from supporting the stupidities of so many scribblers.” *What Life was like when Rome Ruled the World*, by the editors of Time-Life Books (Alexandria, VA : Time-Life Books, 1997) 82.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Connolly, *The Ancient City* (Oxford, NY: Oxford, 1998) 105.

<sup>12</sup> D. B. Johnson, “Art & Architecture,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 124. Although buildings taller than 70’ were forbidden by Augustus’s edict due to their frequent, catastrophic collapses.

<sup>13</sup> Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New Jersey; Princeton, 1996) 150-151.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker 131.

<sup>15</sup> Jerome Neyrey, *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 133. Stark (153) reminds us that at night they often emptied their chamber pots into the street from several stories up, much to the chagrin of unsuspecting passersby (Juvenal, *Sat.* 3.171-322).

insects that flourish where there is much stagnant water and exposed filth. And, like bad odors, insects are very democratic.”<sup>16</sup>

As we step off the main drag into one of the ghettos we notice that all the shops are the same. You see, entire streets are controlled by specific guilds (what we might call “unions”).<sup>17</sup> One street might be bakers, another candle makers, and another blacksmiths. Remember, they are ancient craftsmen, not modern mass-producers. In this economy it is better to stick together than to be in competition with each other. You will also notice that each neighborhood has its own ethnic identity. In many cities these ghettos were literally walled off from each other to curtail the rampant racial tensions.<sup>18</sup>

Racial tensions and poverty are exacerbated by overcrowding. There is only one private home for every 26 blocks of apartments.<sup>19</sup> There are approximately 40 people in each apartment complex and some 46,602 of these complexes.<sup>20</sup> “The average population density in cities of the Roman empire may have approached two hundred per acre – an equivalent found in modern Western cities only in industrial slums.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, there is simply no such thing as privacy for the common person. People are everywhere, and they’re generally pretty loud. Ancient literature is full of complaints about the noise of the city, especially at night. Between the bawling drunks, neighbors shouting across the verandas, arguing gamblers, carousing in the bathhouses, narrow streets and cramped high-rise buildings, it’s pretty tough to get a good night’s sleep.

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<sup>16</sup> Stark 154.

<sup>17</sup> Neyrey 133.

<sup>18</sup> Stark 157-58.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* 151; approximately 3% in Rome and 9% in Pompeii.

<sup>20</sup> Connolly 143. Keener (353) adds that the poor sometimes lived 25 persons to a room

<sup>21</sup> Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1983) 26. According to Stark (149-50) Antioch had 117 per acre and if you factor in the public areas the figure rises to 195. Corinth had 137; Bombay 183; Calcutta 122; Chicago 21; San Francisco 23; New York 37; Manhattan Island 100. This becomes all the more significant when one remembers that there were no buildings higher than five stories and up to 30-40% of the space of the city was public buildings and open areas.

In addition, violence and theft are perpetual problems. “It is well known that the crime rates of modern cities are highly correlated with rates of population turnover.”<sup>22</sup> The literature of the day testifies to the sad fact that Rome is a dangerous and violent place, particularly at night. Even though criminals are punished in ways moderns would deem “cruel and unusual,” this hardly slows the onslaught of burglary and violence propelled by rampant poverty and overcrowding. Bribes are expected and the rich are treated with deference. Romans simply do not assume that persons are equal before the law.<sup>23</sup>

The city is also a place plagued with sickness. Although Romans love their baths, soap has yet to be invented. “Swollen eyes, skin rashes, and lost limbs are mentioned over and over again in the sources as part of the urban scene.”<sup>24</sup> All this results in a life expectancy of about 30 years for the common person.<sup>25</sup> (Although the elite tended to live into their 50’s or even 60’s).<sup>26</sup> On top of that, ancient cities were particularly susceptible to fire, floods, invasion, epidemics, riots, and earthquakes. All told, the city is quite the precarious place.

### **The Social Structure of the City**

We’ve looked around and seen the physical construct of the city. Let’s look now at its social structure. For folks in the Mediterranean, there are three critical features that make life “work”: Group orientation, patron/client, and shame/honor.

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<sup>22</sup> Stark 156.

<sup>23</sup> C. S. Wansink, “Roman Law and Legal System,” *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 987.

<sup>24</sup> John Stambaugh, *The Ancient Roman City* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) 137.

<sup>25</sup> Stark 155. Eighty percent of the burial inscriptions in the Roman port city of Ostia are for persons younger than thirty (Jeffers 44). Although Stark points out a fascinating fact that Christians, because of their care for one another, had a longer life expectancy than their pagan neighbors. This was particularly true in times of epidemics (73-75, 89). A. R. Burn, “*Hic brevis vivitur*” *Past and Present* 4 (1953) 2-31, confirms the fact through analysis of funerary inscriptions of Christians compared to pagans. For a brief synopsis of this argument, see R. Stark, “Live Longer, Healthier, and Better: The Untold Benefits of Becoming a Christian in the Ancient World,” *Christian History* 57 (1998) 28-30.

<sup>26</sup> Connolly 162.

**Group orientation** – In individualistic societies, like America, people see themselves psychologically and define themselves based on their own achievements, personality, and preferences. In group oriented societies, on the other hand, individuals define themselves based on the groups to which they belong.<sup>27</sup> For example, a Jewish person of the Mediterranean world, when asked to describe himself, would say something like, “I am the son of Akiba, a goldsmith from the tribe of Judah and the town of Bethany.” In other words, “I am the sum total of my kinship connections.” These connections include (1) the household,<sup>28</sup> (2) fictive families (like the teacher’s students or members of a synagogue), (3) worker’s guilds or other volunteer association, (4) patron/client groups (see below), and (5) the city/state and ethnic group to which one belongs.<sup>29</sup> The bottom line of group orientation is that we must not merely look at individuals on the streets of Rome; we must discover the groups to which they belong if we are to correctly interpret their behaviors, values, and intentions. Nowhere is this more true than in the church and its treasury. This new fictive family was to have no poor among them (cf. Deut 15:4). Thus they share their resources and give them to the Apostles who would act as patrons, distributing the goods to those who had need (Acts 4:34-35).

**Patron/Client** – Before we go any further, we’re going to have to find a broker . . . no, not a stock broker. A broker is a person who can introduce us to a patron – a person who will take us under his influential wing. We can go to the market to buy goods necessary for everyday life. But for everything else -- land, capital for business, food after a drought, protection, appointments to an

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<sup>27</sup> Bruce Malina, “Dealing with Biblical (Mediterranean) Characters: A Guide for U.S. Consumers,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 19 (1989): 127-141.

<sup>28</sup> The household consisted minimally of father, mother, and children. Secondly it included extended family member such as grandparents, aunts/uncles and cousins. Thirdly, it encompassed the servants of the household and “adopted” workers. David deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 173.

<sup>29</sup> Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1996) 158-64. This group-oriented perspective permeates nearly every page of the gospels and Acts. This is a crucial hermeneutical concept which deserves full and widespread attention in our reading of the New Testament.

office, citizenship, legal aid in court, etc. – we need a patron who will accept us as his clients.<sup>30</sup> It works like this: The patron is a member of the upper 2% of the urban elite who own virtually everything. The patron views himself as the father of a very large family, whether it is an actual kinship group, a city, a province, or in the case of the emperor, the entire Roman world. It is his job to take care of his people, who, in turn, are obligated to pay him homage and deference. He is to offer clients the resources and protection they need to sustain life as well as a good number of social services and entertainments. In fact, most entertainments and public buildings of the ancient world are forms of benefaction. The clients, in turn, are to offer the patron services, fidelity, and honor. For example, the clients are obligated to show up at the patron's house each morning to pay him honors and make their petitions; they are to help him get elected to public office, and they are to follow in his public processions, especially his funeral.<sup>31</sup> And, of course, when one receives a gift, s/he is obligated to publicize it and perpetually remember it, calling attention to the "magnanimous munificence" of the patron (Seneca *Ben.* 2.25.3).<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the patron is obligated *not* to mention it or ever bring it up again as leverage against the client.

Truly, it is not "what you know but who you know." While that, to us, smacks of nepotism, the ancients don't see this system as evil. On the contrary, these exchanges of honor and benefaction are viewed as the "practice that constitutes the chief bond of human society" (Seneca, *Ben.* 1.4.2).

In this social system, reciprocity is mandatory to the honorable person (Cicero *De Offic.* 1.47-48). Ingratitude is seen as one of the chief vices since it disrupted the social interchange of humanity. It is classed with sacrilege against the gods. Those who don't reciprocate are labeled as ingrates and

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<sup>30</sup> John H. Elliott, "Patronage and Clientism in Early Christian Society," *Foundations & Facets Forum* 3/4 (1987) 42.

<sup>31</sup> Ferguson 55.

<sup>32</sup> D. A. deSilva, "Patronage," in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000) 767.

imperil their future by being blackballed from the whole system of giving and receiving (cf. Heb 6:4-8). Interestingly, the New Testament concepts of God's grace and our response of faith (i.e. fidelity to our patron), are deeply bound up in this social system.<sup>33</sup> In fact, evangelism, in this context, is not so much "winning the lost" as "spreading the fame" of our magnificent patron.<sup>34</sup>

**Shame/Honor** – There's one more thing you're going to need to know in order to navigate these streets. The most valuable commodity here is not money or time, but honor. Virtually every interaction you have -- every business deal, conversation, marriage proposal, party -- is all about gaining honor or saving face. For the Jews, Greeks, and Romans, honor is the supreme social commodity (Aristotle *Nic. Eth.* 3.1.1; Isocrates *Ad Dem.* 17, 43; Quintilian *Institutes* 3.8.1; Proverbs 6:32-33; 19:26; 21:21). This permeates nearly every page of the gospels and Acts and must be understood to appreciate the characters we meet there.

So what is honor? Simply put, it is group approval and valuation whether the group is one's family, synagogue, city, province, or empire. How does one get honor? There are three ways. First, honor is **ascribed** by parentage (*Ben Sira* 3:11, "A person's honor comes from his father.") A person's race can be the subject of shame (e.g. Samaritans among the Jews). Honor can also be granted by adoption or through honors given by a social superior. Second, honor can be **achieved** through noble deeds (especially in war) or through generosity (hosting a banquet, building a public building, or providing food during famine). Finally, honor can be won or lost through the "game" of **challenge/riposte**. This is seen time and again with Jesus and the Pharisees (Lk 4:16-30; 5:17-26, 29-32; 6:1-5, 6-11; 10:25-37; 11:14-26, 37-41; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; 15:1-32; 19:1-10, 38-40; 20:1-9, 20-26, 27-40). How do you know when the game is being played? Well, anytime a person is challenged,

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<sup>33</sup> D. A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* 115.

<sup>34</sup> Examples of patron/clients in Luke/Acts would include the prudent servant (Lk 16:4-9); Pilate and Herod (Lk 23:6-12); Theophilus (Lk 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2); Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 22); Felix (Acts 24:2-4; cf. 24:27; 25:9).

confronted, or questioned publicly the game is on!<sup>35</sup> It can be a positive challenge: “Heal me please!” or a negative one, “Show us a sign.” The rules are quite simple. First: I challenge you by a question, a name I call you, an invitation, or even a gift given. Note: generally we only challenge (negatively) social equals, which makes it extraordinary that this Galilean carpenter was challenged so often by the highest religious leaders of his day! However, you don’t want to take an equal to court because that would suggest you need help dealing with this problem, virtually admitting social defeat.<sup>36</sup> Second, you respond (that’s called the “riposte”) with a clever answer, another name, a greater gift, etc. By the way, silence implies defeat. Therefore you *will* play the game, or I will gloat in my victory. Third, the watching crowd then arbitrates through signs of approval for the “winner.” For example, on a number of occasions the gospels say the crowds were delighted with Jesus’ words in reply to the Pharisees (cf. Lk 13:17). They were, in essence, declaring him the winner.

This may sound like child’s play, but the stakes really were quite high for a couple of reasons. First, these folks believe that honor is a limited resource – there’s only so much to go around. Thus, if Jesus gains honor, the Pharisees naturally lose some of theirs. Hence, the game of challenge/riposte can get pretty dirty. Second, we may believe that “sticks and stones” slogan, but in the Mediterranean your name *is your credit* in the social system of Patron/client. Thus, if you lost face, you also lose privilege, bartering power, social status, and benefits. The cost is not merely in self-esteem, but hard, cold credit.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Bruce Malina & Jerome Neyrey, “Honor and Shame in Luke-Acts: Pivotal Values of the Mediterranean World” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, ed. Jermoney Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 29: “In the first-century Mediterranean world, every social interaction that takes place outside one’s family or outside one’s circle of friends is perceived as a challenge to honor, a mutual attempt to acquire honor from one’s social equal. Thus gift-giving, invitations to dinner, debates over issues of law, buying and selling, planning marriages, or arranging what we might call cooperative ventures for farming, business, fishing, mutual help – all these sorts of interactions take place according to the patterns of honor called challenge riposte.”

<sup>36</sup> Malina 43.

<sup>37</sup> This is seen in the fact that “humility” shows up in the lists of Christian virtues, but not in pagan ones.

The church in Acts is challenged constantly (Acts 4:1-3; 5:17-18, 40-41; 7:54-8:3; 12:1-4; 1 Thess 2:14; 1 Pet 2:12; 3:16; 4:12-16) and therefore has to find mechanisms for explaining how being dishonored through public ridicule and persecution is actually a thing of honor. They do this by (1) predicting it, (2) turning its perpetrators into ignorant and shameless individuals, and (3) by showing that you are merely emulating prophets before you, namely, Moses and Jesus (cf. Acts 5:41; Lk 6:22-23; John 15:18-21; 1 Thess 3:2-4; Heb 12:1-4).<sup>38</sup> Thus shame is turned into a badge of honor. The expansion of the church testifies to the success of this mechanism.

### **Social Status**

These three values of group-orientation, patron/client, and honor/shame, while somewhat nebulous on paper, operate within a very real hierarchy of power. As we walk these streets of Rome, we will see every echelon of influence. At the top of the totem pole, of course, is the **emperor**. He is pretty much sovereign, although his life is under constant threat of assassination. Next in rank are the **senators**, numbering 600 and required to be freeborn citizens owning 250,000 denarii (Dio 56.41.3; *Res Gestae* 8). They make up a mere 0.002% of the population. Oh, there goes one now . . . you can identify them by the broad purple sash across their toga (whereas the knights sport two thin purple stripes). You will also notice they have the chief seats in the theater and arena, while the knights sit behind them in the next fourteen rows. **Equestrians** (or “knights”), make up another .1% of the population and are required to own 100,000 denarii.<sup>39</sup> We should note here that while these orders are required to have a certain amount of money, economics and honor does not have the same one-to-one correlation it does in the modern west. For instance, some slaves own more money than most of the freeborn citizens because of their connection with wealthy owners. Yet freeborn

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<sup>38</sup> deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship & Purity* 66.

<sup>39</sup> As a general rule, equestrians were able to gain more wealth than senators because there were fewer demands on them for patronage and because no self-respecting senator would engage in much trade since it was seen as a dishonest occupation. Equestrians were not scrutinized as closely and could engage in lucrative commerce.

citizens are always more honorable than slaves. The reason for the wealth requirements for senators and knights is that they are expected to be community patrons, which requires vast sums of money. It was also reasoned that only the wealthy could afford to be honest. The poor are expected to lie, cheat, and steal to survive. The fourth in rank are the **decuriones** – the hundred most elite citizens of each city. Paul actually came in contact with a number of these: Sergius Paulus on Cyprus (Acts 13:7-12), Gallio in Achaia (Acts 18:12), Asiarchs in Ephesus (Acts 19:31), Publius on Malta (Acts 28:7), and Procurator Festus (Acts 25:7). While there are no known members of the any New Testament church from the upper three ranks (although Sergius Paulus and the Ethiopian Eunuch are likely exceptions), Dionysius (Acts 17:34) and Erastus (Rom 16:23) would most certainly have been decurions and Manae (Acts 13:1) and the women of Acts 17:4, 13 are clearly have high social standing.<sup>40</sup>

Now we must take a Herculean leap from the upper two percent (senators, equestrians, and decurions) to the lower 98%.<sup>41</sup> They are made up of free-born urban plebians, the rural peasants, then the freedmen (*liberti*) and finally the slaves (*servi*).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> “Some members of the Pauline communities were possibly relatively prosperous and perhaps belonged to the group of the rich of their city. Nonetheless, they lack the decisive signs of status of the upper stratum (noble birth, political power, clear indications of substantial wealth)” (E. Stegemann & W. Stegemann, *The Jesus Movement* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999] 296). Others in the Pauline circle who may have had substantial wealth or influence include Aristarchus the Thessalonian (Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Philemon 24; Col 4:10f), Sosipater, son of Pyrrhus from Beroea (Acts 20:4; Rom 16:21); Timothy (Acts 16:1-17:14; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4; cf. 1 Thess 1:1; 3:2, 6; Rom 16:21), Tychicus from Asia (Acts 20:4; Col 4:7f; Eph 6:21f.); and those of Caesar’s household (Phil 4:22). Meeks (73) suggests that both the extreme upper and lower eschelons of society were missing from the Pauline congregations (senators, knights and the squalid poor). Yet there was still great economic and social diversity – wealthy, women, Jews, slaves, educated, business women, political leaders, etc. They seem to have functioned in the church under the same system of patronage that characterized the pluralistic society of the secular city. Celsus of the second century was the first pagan to take Christianity seriously. He accused them of being poor and uneducated (Meeks 53). This suggestion dominated even scholarly circles until recently and has been sufficiently dismantled.

<sup>41</sup>D. F. Watson, “Roman Social Classes,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans and S. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 1000, places the lower class at 99%.

<sup>42</sup> David W. Gill, “Acts and the Urban Élites,” in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, Vol. 2, Ed. By David W. Gill & Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 106-117.

We should point out here that these classes (remember to think in terms of social, not economic classes), were static. This whole yuppie idea of the young upwardly mobile was utterly unknown. Ninety-eight percent of the population would find “their lot was an unquestioned, if uneasy, acceptance of dominance by some supreme and remote power, with little control over conditions that governed their lives.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, because all goods are perceived as limited, if one person attempts to accumulate wealth, it is viewed as threatening someone else’s very existence. Hence, any such activity is viewed as selfish, anti-social, and dangerous. In a kinship society, that significantly hindered any entrepreneur. In fact, there is probably more downward mobility than upward at this period.<sup>44</sup> Most folks are simply trying to hang on to what they have.

There are, however, three groups that do sometimes raise in status and/or economic position. First, there are merchants. Because of the widespread travel afforded by *pax romana* and the Roman roads, those willing to risk the capital they have are able to make a killing on imported products from as far flung places as China, India, and Africa. The downside is, while they get rich, they are viewed as unscrupulous for making money simply by transporting goods from one place to another without actually producing anything. (Yes, capitalism is viewed as inherently evil). The second “upwardly mobile” group are soldiers. After twenty years of service they are granted full citizenship for themselves and for their children in perpetuity as well as legal status for a wife they may have taken during their tour of duty. This citizenship is nothing to scoff at, for it affords (1) special protection from extreme punishment (notably flogging and crucifixion), (2) a vote in public elections in Rome (if present), (3) attendance at the games and public performances, (4) exemption from many taxes, and (5) full protection by Roman law in legal contracts and marriages.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Malina 89.

<sup>44</sup> Rohrbaugh, “The City in the Second Temple” 68.

<sup>45</sup> Jeffers 198. Citizenship certificates were on wooden diptych small enough to be carried with you. Paul claimed his citizenship in Philippi (Acts 16:37), in Jerusalem (Acts 22:25), and in Caesarea (Acts 25:11).

The third “upwardly mobile” group is slaves. Look all around; they’re everywhere. They don’t look any different from anyone else, but one in every three people in this city is a slave (empire wide it as about 20%).<sup>46</sup> Seneca (*De Clementia* 1.24.1) tells of a proposal in the senate which would have required slaves to wear distinctive clothing so they could be identified. The proposal was ultimately rejected because the senators feared a rebellion if the slaves could identify each other and see how many of them there really are. Where do they all come from? Prisoners of war, mostly, but others are captured by slave traders, some are poor people sold to pay off debts, others are slaves bred in captivity, still others are infants exposed by their parents at birth and raised by a slave trader. I know this isn’t a good justification, but as a statement of fact, nearly everyone but the poorest citizens have slaves. As a general rule, the Romans (unlike the Greeks) do not view their slaves as inferior human beings. In fact, many of them are cherished family members and respected as artisans, physicians, counselors, educators, musicians, architects, cooks, actors, magicians, prophets, poets, and philosophers. Often, with a kind master, their lives could be more predictable and healthier than the freeborn poor. On the other hand, cruel owners could be merciless, particularly with runaways who would be flogged, chained, banished to the mines, branded, or crucified (cf. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 9.12). “The evidence proves the torture of ancient slaves to have been far more severe than the punishments sanctioned by the law in the slave society of Brazil, the most brutal of the modern world.”<sup>47</sup> But often, after 30 years of service, they would be set free.<sup>48</sup> Many could also purchase their freedom with the money they earned (*peculium*).

One thing is certain; it is easy to get lost in all this maze of humanity. In the village, your networks are clear. But here, between the bustling traffic of merchants, the cat calls of prostitutes,

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<sup>46</sup> Tucker 68; and Jeffers 221. Although J. A. Harrill, “Slaves,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) 1125, thinks it was more like 16-20%.

<sup>47</sup> Harrill, 1125.

<sup>48</sup> Gerd Theissen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians*, tr. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 191. Women tended to be liberated earlier than men, usually for marriage, which 29% of the time was to their masters.

the pomp of the elite, and the squalid poor seeping through the streets, it's just not possible to survive alone. We're going to have to join a club, or a volunteer association, as they are called. They are groups, normally between 40 and 100, that share a common interest and resources; often they eat together, and they generally take care of burials for the group. Virtually all of them are religious in nature but banned from any political activity.<sup>49</sup> Most of them revolve around an individual household, a certain occupation, or a cherished deity, but there are hundreds of these groups.<sup>50</sup> Some of them truly are bizarre, such as those found in Pompey entitled "Petty Thieves," "Late Drinkers," and "Late Sleepers."<sup>51</sup> Of course the Jewish synagogue is a natural association group. There are 2.5 million Jews in Israel and 5-6 million scattered throughout the empire (Philo *Legatio Ad Caium* 36), with 50,000 in Rome itself. The Jewish population in Greek cities may have been as high as 10%.<sup>52</sup> Obviously, there are synagogues everywhere. Not only did this provide sustenance to Jews, this was the cradle of the Christian church as well.

Churches, for the first three hundred years, were essentially volunteer associations that met in homes.<sup>53</sup> They inherited from Judaism a social network of communication, travel, and benevolence, which helped support the Christian community (even financially), in ways heretofore only afforded to the elite. In other words, they stayed in each others' homes, gave each other jobs, and bought each others' products. Christianity was essentially a movement of the household.<sup>54</sup> They

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<sup>49</sup> Jeffers 73.

<sup>50</sup> B. R. Pearson, "Associations," in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 136.

<sup>51</sup> Time-Life Books, 87.

<sup>52</sup> Gill 113.

<sup>53</sup> Bradley Blue, "Acts and the House Church," in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, Vol 2, Ed. By David W. J. Gill & Conrad Gempf (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994) 120. The first Christians in Rome did not meet in the catacombs. This would neither explain where Christians elsewhere in the empire would have met nor where they met in Rome prior to the third century. Rather, the Christians' presence in the catacombs was merely part of their burial ritual, likely associated with a funerary society to which they belonged.

<sup>54</sup> Blue 126, states: "Archaeological evidence suggests that it was not uncommon for a domestic residence to be renovated for the sole purpose of accommodating the needs of the Christian community." Normally these homes could serve as a meeting place for 40-60 people.

were dependent on homes in which to meet (Acts 1:13; 2:46; 5:42; 12:12; 16:40; 17:6; 20:20; Rom 16:3-5, 23; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15), and often whole households were converted at once (Acts 10:24, 44-48; 16:14-15, 31-34; 18:8). The church became its own kinship group, complete with brothers, sisters, even patrons, clients, and brokers. They plugged into their social world well. But there was one drastic change. Christians were the first social groups to be inclusive across class lines. They purposefully reached out and welcomed all sorts of people. “This diastatic cohesion in the early Christian congregations was something new in pagan society.”<sup>55</sup>

Christianity revitalized life in Greco-Roman cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires, and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective nursing services.<sup>56</sup>

### **Daily Life**<sup>57</sup>

We’re going to spend the night with our Christian brother, but I’m warning you now, it’s going to be cramped. He lives on the fourth floor of some tenement apartments with his parents, wife, two children, and his unmarried sister. The charcoal brazier is our only source of heat and the only way to cook. Furthermore, since chimneys have yet to be invented, it’s going to get pretty stuffy.<sup>58</sup> Fortunately the animal skins that cover the windows are anything but air-tight, so we won’t have to worry about suffocation (although if you’re prone to colds you might try to keep out of the draft). Because the rooms are so small, the only thing we do in the apartment is store our belongings

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<sup>55</sup> Theissen 214.

<sup>56</sup> Stark 161.

<sup>57</sup> For a detailed analysis of Roman daily life, see Jérôme Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, tr. E. O. Lorimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940). Harold Johnston’s *Private Life of the Romans* (Chicago: Scott, Foresman and Co., 1903) is an older work, but still filled with a plethora of miscellaneous historical tidbits.

<sup>58</sup> Because of oil lamps and cooking braziers, these wooden framed structures were in constant danger of both fire and collapse. Thousands died in these disasters.

and sleep,<sup>59</sup> and we won't do that too well – Rome is raucous when the sun sets. In fact, we're not even going to eat there. We'll have dinner in one of the small “restaurants” (*caupona*) located on every street. The menu is often inscribed on the stone outside the door so you can see what they offer. If we don't have time to sit down, we can grab a quick bite at the counter of one of the local taverns (*taberna*), or even grab a snack from a street vendor (*popina*). Romans eat three main meals a day. Breakfast is a simple affair featuring bread and cheese. Lunch is larger, including bread, cold meat (if you can afford it), fruit and wine (diluted with water and served warm). Dinner is the main meal, so plan to eat more heartily, but don't plan on sugar -- honey and fruit are the only sweeteners here. I hope you like things spicy -- pepper is put on almost everything, including bread. Their favorite condiment, however, is garum, a liquid produced by placing fish and their entrails in a bucket, leaving it in the sun and allowing it to ferment. The juice is then siphoned off and doused on all kinds of main dishes which might include chicken, fish, muscles, oysters, pork, mutton, and beef, as well as some exotic game for the rich like partridge, hare, venison, wild boar, crane, and pheasant.

Let's stop here and use the public bathrooms. Our host may only have a chamber pot. If he does have indoor plumbing, it will likely be a small toilet under the stairwell and flushed with a pitcher of grey water from the “kitchen.” By the way, there's no toilet paper, but next to the toilet is a bucket of water. There you'll find a stick with a sponge on the end of it. That will have to suffice. I hope you're not shy; these facilities will seat 15-30 people. What's that? A stall? . . . Uh . . . no, don't plan on any sort of privacy.

Next door we'll find the fuller who can wash our off-white wool tunics. It's quite an interesting process. Since there's no soap, our launderer uses a mixture of urine (collected by volunteers looking for a convenient place to relieve themselves), mixed with potash, carbonate of soda, and an absorbent clay. Our garments will be thrown into a large vat and agitated by hand . . . well, actually

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<sup>59</sup> J. E. Packer, “Housing and Population in Imperial Ostia and Rome,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 57 (1967) 80-95.

by foot. An unfortunate worker is assigned the task of stomping through our soiled garments. As one might imagine, the mixture in the vat, as well as the fumes of the sulfur-burning smudge pot, create a number of health risks for workers. It stinks to high heaven in there, so let's be on our way. We will have an early start in the morning.

### **In the Morning: School & Hygiene**

We rise with the sun to try to beat the heat of the day. Our first task is to get the kids off to school. They attend a private school, of course, since there is no such thing as public education. Most schools have between 60-120 students. Their lessons will run about 6 hours a day. Their curriculum consists mostly of recitations from famous authors such as the epic poems of Homer, the tragedies of Euripides, and the comedies of Menander. There is serious attention given to rhetoric thanks to the careful handbook on public speaking by Demosthenes.<sup>60</sup> Don't forget your abacus; we will have math today. And, of course, there is the ever-present writing tablets -- a thin sheet of wood with a veneer of wax that can be etched and then smoothed time and time again. We must take our lessons seriously. It's quite a privilege to attend school. It's only a guess, but probably between 10-20% of the empire is literate, and only one literate woman for every five or six literate men. Besides, if we don't do our lessons, our fathers may beat us severely, not to mention the teacher. And there's no sense looking for the ACLU either; Roman father's have the right of life and death over their children (all their lives) and they generally believe that tough love is best. They are cautious about playing or laughing too much with their children lest they risk spoiling them (Ecclesiasticus 30:1-13). Of course, fathers *are* taught not to act out of anger.

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<sup>60</sup> Jeffers 254-55. While the Greeks gave their most serious attention to Philosophy, Romans prized the study of rhetoric. They were meticulous in following the rules for various kinds of speeches such as forensic debates and the encomium. Malina, Bruce & Neyrey, Jerome. *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KN: John Knox Press, 1996) have masterfully shown how the apostle Paul (in both Acts and the Epistles), carefully followed and adapted the contemporary rules of public speaking laid down by Demosthenes, Quintilian, Cicero, and Aristotle.

Now that the kids are on their way, let's stop at the barber for a shave. This is a daily ritual for men since it's nearly impossible to keep a sharp razor at home, and most men prefer to be clean shaven. Besides, it's a great place to start your day, catching up on the latest gossip. Women, of course, have their own hygienic rituals. They are most fond of their hair which is perpetually in a new style – braided, curled with hot irons, dyed, woven with silver strands and ordained with all manner of jewelry (1 Tim 2:9; 1 Pet 3:3). They also paint their faces with a surprising array of cosmetics. From the neck down, however, they were fairly modest in dress.

### **Money and Work**

Economically Rome is a tough place. Interest rates are around 8.3%; approximately 200,000 citizens are on “welfare,” -- they receive six to seven bushels of grain each month from the government;<sup>61</sup> and there are taxes on everything: sales tax 1%, sale of slaves 4%, inheritance tax 5%, property tax 2%, import tax 2%, etc.<sup>62</sup> This, of course, does not include the tithes and taxes Jews pay to the temple in Jerusalem.<sup>63</sup> After all was said and done, a Jewish citizen may spend as much as 30% of his income on taxes.<sup>64</sup> This has proven to be an excessive burden to the rural poor who usually wind up losing land to their patron-overlords.

So we must work hard for a living. The streets of Rome are lined with shops. Actually, these shops are merely the street-side of people's homes and apartments. Living quarters and storage rooms are in the back and upstairs. As the sun rises, they open wide their front doors and a veritable bee-hive of activity begins. There are over 100 different kinds of specially workshops in Rome:

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<sup>61</sup> Tucker 242.

<sup>62</sup> D. W. Gill, “Taxation,” *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 1162.

<sup>63</sup> Temples around the empire served not only as religious institutions but also as the major banks.

<sup>64</sup> Craig Evans, “Crisis in the Middle East” *Church History* 17/3 (1998) 20-24. Judea contributed between 2-5% of Rome's total income. Even so, it cost Rome more than that to control this volatile yet pivotal piece of real-estate. Hence one can see why there was such tension on both sides of this particular ledger sheet.

weavers, potters, fullers, bakers, book-sellers, grocers, auctioneers, cobblers, carpenters, etc.<sup>65</sup> But remember, these people are not entrepreneurs climbing their way up the economic ladder – there are no modern markets. These are the working poor, benefiting the upper 2% of the economic elite. They work hard to eke out a living. But they need their rest too and so, every afternoon from 12 to 2 the city comes to a grinding halt for a “siesta.” And while there are no weekends, the Romans more than make up for it in festivals which exceed both weekends and holidays in America combined.<sup>66</sup>

As a general principle, upper-class Romans despise work, not because they were lazy, but because they see labor as ignoble. Even occupations we deem as noble, such as physicians, lawyers, artists, and teachers are jobs done in Rome mostly by educated slaves. There are only two noble occupations for the Roman: War and farming.<sup>67</sup>

### **Marriage, Sexuality, and Religion**

Oh look, a wedding procession! Let me point out several things here. First, this is an arranged wedding. Theoretically the children are supposed to agree with the father’s choice. Practically, however, his decision is sovereign. Notice also how young the girl is. Most Roman girls are married between 12 and 18,<sup>68</sup> and men usually wed in their mid-twenties.

The explicit purpose for marriage is to bear children, although the Romans aren’t doing a very good job of that. By the time of Augustus, birthrates had declined so radically that he instituted a law penalizing individuals who were either single or childless, while rewarding those with three or

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<sup>65</sup> Stegemann & Stegemann 30.

<sup>66</sup> Jeffers 30. “The number of such festivals filling the Roman calendar year increased in the first centuries B.C., and by the time of Augustus seven annual state *ludi* took up sixty-five days (thirteen for chariot racing and forty-eight for theatrical festivals)” M. Pucci, “Circuses and Games,” *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) 209.

<sup>67</sup> Jeffers 20, estimates that perhaps as much as 90 percent of the Empire’s workforce was involved in agriculture or herding. “The main crops were wheat, barley, olives and grapes. But cabbages, onions, lentils, peas, garlic and figs were also grown. More exotic fruit and vegetables were imported from neighboring states” Connolly 44 (cf. Rev 18).

<sup>68</sup> “Nearly 40 percent of women were married before age fifteen and nearly 70 percent before the age of nineteen,” Keener 683.

more children. Some blame the low birthrate on the frequent hot baths. But contraceptives and abortions are more obvious culprits. Birth control is common (including primitive I.U.D.'s and condoms made of unborn lamb stomachs or goat bladders, although these are expensive). While abortion is dangerous, it too is common, mostly to cover up infidelity. The easiest method of ridding an unwanted pregnancy is exposure, simply leaving the child in an open area to die. The "fortunate" ones are picked up by slave traders for cheap labor or prostitution. While exposure seems like a horrible crime to us, fathers have every legal right over the lives of their children. Girls, who are a legal and social liability, most often fall prey to exposure. They are seen as problematic. When they are young, you worry that they will not marry; when they are virgins you must protect their purity; when they are married you worry that they will be infertile or unfaithful, all of which would shame a father. While abortion (and infanticide) are heatedly debated among Mediterraneans, it is common practice and advocated by such pillars as Plato and Aristotle as a legitimate state policy.<sup>69</sup> In addition, we must take into account infant mortality. "A disproportionate number died in infancy, and of those who survived into adolescence roughly half reached twenty-five with the number of survivors continuing to be halved every decade of life, making the average life expectancy for live births around twenty five or thirty years."<sup>70</sup>

Women simply don't fare so well in this system, although there is increasing liberation for women in business, society, clubs, and religion.<sup>71</sup> Case in point, while Greek women had no recourse to divorce their husbands except in cases of domestic violence, Roman women do. Even so, if a Roman woman is infertile, it is expected that she will be divorced. Furthermore, adultery, in the eyes

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<sup>69</sup> In the excavations of Ashkelon, Lawrence Stager and his colleagues found that the sewer under the bathhouse had been clogged with refuse. In examining the line, they found the bones of nearly 100 infants that had been murdered and thrown into the sewer. Lawrence Stager, "Eroticism and Infanticide at Ashkelon." *Biblical Archaeology Review* 17 (July-Aug 1991) 34-53.

<sup>70</sup> Keener 359. Stark, 160 adds, "At least half of the children died at birth or during infancy, and most of the children who lived lost at least one parent before reaching maturity."

<sup>71</sup> Meeks 24.

of the law, is only a female crime.<sup>72</sup> Apollodorus (mid-fourth century B.C.) said, “We have courtesans [*hetairai*] for pleasure, handmaidens for the daily care of the body, wives to bear legitimate children and to be a trusted guardian of things in the house” ([Ps.] Demosthenes 59.122).<sup>73</sup> Sexual immorality runs rampant, especially homosexuality between men in their teens and early twenties. Truly, for a woman, it is better to married to a Jewish man, constrained by the law of God. Better still it is to be a Christian woman. They tend to fare much better than their pagan counterparts. “Christian women enjoyed far greater marital security and equality than did her pagan neighbor. . . . They were married at a substantially older age and had more choice about whom they married.”<sup>74</sup> In this way, Christianity has permeated even the most intimate recesses of the city.

Speaking of Christianity permeating the city, we need now to look at the temples which tower all around us. As Ferguson says, “Christianity did not enter a religious vacuum. . . . People were not sitting around waiting for a new religion to burst on the scene. Dozens, if not hundreds, of religions were available.”<sup>75</sup> Although these generally fall under one of four umbrellas. First, there are religions of deities housed in temples – Zeus, Artemis, Pan, etc. This is the public sort of ritual religion adopted from the Greek pantheon but given Roman names. “In general, Greek religion was not organized around a set of coherent doctrines, but rather centered in the observance of

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<sup>72</sup> Given these glaring disparities between men’s and women’s rights, moderns might wonder why they didn’t “buck” the system. Given the shame/honor social construct, “a woman who stepped outside of those roles would not have been considered courageous and forward-looking; she would have been thought selfish and decadent” Jeffers 249.

<sup>73</sup> For this reason brides do not look to their husbands for companionship and comfort. They remain as strangers in their husband’s household, that is, until the birth of a son, which gains her status and provides her an advocate, even against her husband. Their closest kinship tie is to their brothers. If a girl is defiled, the father will be incensed, but it is the brother who seeks revenge. So, “In the first-century world, marital problems were discussed with brothers and sisters, not with parents or friends” Malina, *N.T. World* 143.

<sup>74</sup> Stark 105. Stark estimates there were 140 males in Italy for every 100 females. In the church that was very different because of the prohibition of infanticide and abortion and because of women’s higher propensity to convert than men. Thus women enjoyed far greater status than their pagan counterparts. This is reflected in the N.T. data listing women and their roles in the church: Lydia (Acts 16:14, 40), Priscilla (Acts 18:2-3; Rom 16:3-4; 1 Cor 16:19), Phoebe (Rom 16:1-2), the mother of Rufus (Rom 16:13) and Chloe (1 Cor 1:11).

<sup>75</sup> Everett Ferguson, “The Competition,” *Christian History* 57 (1998) 34.

traditional rituals such as processions, prayers, libations, sacrifice and feasting.”<sup>76</sup> Second, there are local and household gods. These are kind of family traditions celebrated in very specific families or locations. Third, there are deities immortalized in character traits such as Hope, Harmony, Peace, Wealth, Health, etc. (cf. Acts 17:18; 28:4). This was the most nebulous type of religion. Fourth, there was the emperor cult. Essentially, since the emperor was the patron for the entire “world,” he had the power of a god and was thus revered as one. In the east, such deification of monarchs was a long-standing tradition and was easily adopted. In Rome itself, however, such homage was, at first, paid only after the emperor had died. Interestingly, the emperors who wound up being the worst persecutors of Christians (Nero and Caligula) were the very ones who most adamantly demanded titles of deity while they were yet alive.

All this makes for a very complex religious scene in Rome. Religion is different for the poet, the philosopher, the statesman, and the commoner. As Tucker records in an exaggerated slogan: “All religions are regarded by the people as equally true, by the philosopher as equally false and by the statesman as equally useful.”<sup>77</sup> While Americans tend to see religion as a very private act between the individual and his/her God, Mediterraneans see religion more as an identification with an ethnic or geographic community, an essential ingredient of their social setting.

## **Entertainment**

We’ve come this far; we might as well have a bit of fun, and our options are not few. There are a whole slew of activities to tickle our fancy.

**Greek Entertainment: Gymnasium and Theater.** The word “gymnasium” comes from the Greek word meaning “naked” which describes the apparel of the participants. Like modern swimmers shaving all the hair from their bodies, Greek athletes took their competitions as seriously

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<sup>76</sup> D. E. Aune, “Religion, Greco-Roman,” *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 918.

<sup>77</sup> Tucker 370.

as any modern counterpart. But it wasn't just professionals. The *gymnasia* was the center of Greek education, both literary and physical, was a prerequisite for citizenship in Greek cities, and was an essential part of every respected city's structures. The *gymnasia* official was elected for a year's term, during which he took responsibility for providing for its expenses – fuel for the hot water, and oil for anointing and for the lights. Each *gymnasia* contained a *palaistra* for wrestling, a *droma* (running track), as well as a series of other rooms for dressing, anointing with oil, exercising with balls and punching bags, and classrooms for instruction. The main events consisted of running, long jumping, discus and javelin throwing, boxing, and wrestling.

The Greek's other major social contribution was the theater. They were masters of satire, the simple set, and, of course, the actor's mask, from which we get our word "hypocrite." The Romans added to (or degenerated from) the Greek theater with quite a bit of burlesque, violence, and nudity, as well as the "cheap" entertainment of acrobats, jugglers, and slapstick.<sup>78</sup> There was so much nudity and obscenity that no Christian or Jew could feel comfortable attending even if it was one of the precious few places an ordinary citizen could rub shoulders with his leaders.

**Roman Entertainments: Race Track, Arena, and Bath Houses.** The greatest love of Romans is chariot races (pulled by 2-10 horses). The Circus Maximus is the pride of the city, seating some 385,000 people. We'll still need to arrive early to get a seat! This is serious business (just as modern sports) that can allow a slave to earn huge sums of money as well as his freedom. Each of the four teams (white, red, blue, and green) has their own vets, trainers, coaches, blacksmiths, and grooms. If you have ear plugs you might want to wear them; this crowd tends to rout raucously for their favorite color and then argue for days about the merits of their own team and how they performed during the contest.

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<sup>78</sup> J. R. Cousland, "Theaters" *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 1219. Although there were some positive contributions such as pantomime, mime, dance, and females being allowed on stage in limited roles (as acrobats and mimes) [generally female roles were played by male actors in drag].

The arena is quite a different spectacle. It caters to the baser instincts of the Romans. If you don't like the sight of blood, you better steer clear of the coliseum. This huge arena, financed through the spoils of the sack of Jerusalem of A.D. 70, can seat 45-55,000 screaming fans who often determine the life or death of a gladiator through their cheers. Here you can witness wild beast hunts, human gladiatorial contests, and even naval battles. In a single day thousands of exotic animals and hundreds of human lives will be extinguished (mostly runaway slaves, prisoners of war, condemned criminals, and professional gladiators).<sup>79</sup> These "festivals" often last for weeks or months with each show outdoing the previous bloody spectacle. The whole menagerie began in 264 B.C. at the funeral of Marcus Iunius Brutus Pera when three pairs of gladiators fought to the death. This was based on the belief that human blood death propitiated the deceased. It has grown until there are 272 stone amphitheaters throughout the empire.<sup>80</sup> This bloody spectacle won't be brought to a halt until Christianity prevails in the highest governing office. They will be banned in A.D. 325, but not fully extinguished until A.D. 430.

Let's get out of here and go take a bath . . . I'm feeling like I need one. This is going to be a real treat! For the Romans, the bathhouse took the significance of the Greek gymnasias. It is a place of social interaction that marked one as a Roman.<sup>81</sup> Normally they contain four rooms: *apoditerium* for changing, *frigidarium* for cold water baths, *tepidarium* for lukewarm water baths, and *caldarium* for hot-water baths. Between baths you rub down with oil and scrap it off in order to remove dirt (remember there is no soap). Between baths you can also pay for a massage, hairstyling, or cosmetics (although women usually bathe separately at specific hours). Much business, as well as pleasure,

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<sup>79</sup> The Colosseum of Rome was not used in any official act of Christian persecution that we know of.

<sup>80</sup> M. Pucci, "Arenas," *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000) 111.

<sup>81</sup> Both baths and gymnasias were primarily for citizens, or at least those with some wealth (Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 95).

takes place in the bath house (similar to a modern golf-course). But I think we should simply relax and soak in all we've seen.

**Private Entertainments: Banquets and Bars.** We have a wonderful opportunity this evening. One of the wealthy patrons of the church has invited us to a love feast at his house.<sup>82</sup> This is not just an important part of Christian fellowship, but of Roman society at large. Everything at the meal is mapped out: *Who* eats with whom and *who* performs what function(s). *What* is eaten and *how* it is prepared. *When* the meals take place and *when* the various elements are served. *Where* one eats and *where* one sits.<sup>83</sup> Meals were not merely social occasions, they were social opportunities to gain or lose status and honor. They must be managed carefully. Commensality marks the boundaries of society. Once one discovers who eats with whom, how, where, and why, many aspects of society open up.<sup>84</sup> But for now, let's just look around the room and enjoy ourselves. The guests are seated in the *triclinium*, on a horseshoe-shaped series of banquet tables (*lectus*) with a clear pecking order (make sure you're in the right seat please, or we might have an embarrassing situation on our hands [cf. Lk 14:7-11]). "The guests might play games, or be entertained by dancers (cf. Mark 6:21-22), acrobats, or jugglers. An author might recite a recent composition, or musicians might play. Female companionship might be provided by *hetairai*. Again, the percentage of the wine had something to do with the intimacy of the entertainment."<sup>85</sup> Of course, this is a Christian meal, so we don't need to warn you about the kinds of bawdy practices that are common at similar pagan engagements.

Oh look at that spread! I would eat heartily if I were you. This is one of the few times you can expect a meal like this when you are a commoner. Our host in the tenement apartments has

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<sup>82</sup> Eating is mentioned 23 times in Luke and 5 in Acts. Meals proper are recorded 5 times in Luke and 2 times in Acts. Cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts*, Ed. Jerome Neyrey (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991) 361-387.

<sup>83</sup> It regularly did happen that not all the guests were served the same food or the same amount (cf. 1 Cor 11:21, 33).

<sup>84</sup> J. Dominic Crossan, "The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant," *The Christian Century* (December 18-25, 1991) 1194-1200.

<sup>85</sup> Ferguson, *Background* 98.

neither the resources nor the space to throw this kind of shindig. His only hope of eating like this would be at a banquet thrown by the Christian association (i.e. the church).

Look at the time! It's already 8:30 p.m. and the sun is setting. We had better get back to the apartment. I know the party is still going on and will probably continue until the early morning hours, but without an escort the streets of Rome are quite dangerous at night. Let's make our way home before the hooligans run the streets.

On the way we will pass several taverns that are just now swinging into full gear. I know, all the laughter sounds like a lot of fun, but let's just pass. Mostly you're just missing out on a lively game of dice or a cock-fight in the back . . . the stakes are too high for us anyway. Gambling is a favorite and raucous pastime in these shady establishments. I can promise you that you'll be happier and healthier in the morning, not to mention more financially stable, if we just scurry on by. Besides, it's late and we need to take another stab at a good night's sleep. We've got a lot of work to do tomorrow. One wonders with all the corruption, carousing, poverty, and sexual immorality if there will ever be a notable Christian presence in this city.

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. Describe the physical features of an ancient city, particularly the classic structures that made up a Greco-Roman city.
2. What social values did the Mediterraneans have that would seem foreign to us?
3. Describe the living conditions of the 98% who did not have access to wealth, particularly issues of food, privacy, safety, sexuality and health.
4. In what ways did Romans entertain themselves?

**Essential Reading:**

Connolly, Peter. *The Ancient City* (Oxford, NY: Oxford, 1998).

*Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. C. Evans & S. Porter (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2000).

Malina, Bruce. *The New Testament World* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2001).

Neyrey, Jerome. *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991).

Stark, Rodney. *The Rise of Christianity* (New Jersey; Princeton, 1996).