

*Populus Romanus eo magnitudinis crevit, ut viribus suis confeceretur.*¹

Classical Thought²



The Roman Empire and Classical Thought Background Lesson

The two tendencies

There are two competing tendencies in philosophy, and these are seen especially clearly in the expanding Roman Empire. As the empire grew and became more powerful people became more and more conscious that the individual does not control his own destiny. With the expansion of the empire and its power around the Mediterranean world people realised they were not the masters of their fate and so much depended on external circumstances and political conditions.

In philosophy this led to two competing tendencies:

1. A “this worldly” tendency recommending that you either “go with the flow” in a passive way or else search for *political* solutions to life's problems. If your focus is on this world you get involved in politics and look to the state to solve life's problems.
2. An “otherworldly” tendency which considers that a better beautiful world lies beyond our ordinary experience. This is a more platonic mysticism searching for a mystical insight or which concentrates on the inner life, not the outward political nature of man etc. this view stresses personal values and peace of mind.

We will follow these two tendencies over the next few lessons.

The Roman Empire – its importance in how people thought

Philosophy did not develop in a vacuum it was influenced by the conditions in which people had to live. Once Rome rose to power and exercised its influence over the Mediterranean world, people saw things in a worldwide imperial perspective, not a local city-state perspective as the Greeks had once done. This affected the way people thought and did philosophy and it is important to us as Christians. To understand the significance of the claims of Christ it helps to understand Roman Empire as well as the schools of thought that were available at that time because they were both a matter for Christian confrontation. Christians are going to have a different message, a different

¹ The Roman nation grew to that magnitude, that at length they were destroyed by their own strength. Horace

² These lessons are derived from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

outlook on life (compared to the philosophers) and also a different way of life with a different view of community and authority compared to the Roman Empire.

Alexander the Great

Alexander is rather like a forerunner to the Roman Empire. His geographical expansion of his rule as a Greek Emperor called for a much stronger bond than that which originally held together the Greek city states. Originally there was ethnic superiority among the Greeks as well as a loose confederation between the city states. Alexander realised these two things would not be enough to hold his empire together. He therefore encouraged ethnic homogeneity throughout his empire, encouraging his soldiers to intermarry across the empire. This in time brought with it a levelling of the Greek ethnic superiority. He also wanted to create some sort of brotherhood. He needed a sense of order too. To achieve these things Alexander had himself worshipped as a god. This deification of the emperor arose from a political need to reinforce and stabilize the empire. It is ironic that this god-emperor not only died but died at the young age of 33 in 323BC.

The Roman Empire – Law codified and franchise expanded

In 452BC unwritten Roman laws were set down on the *Leges Duodecim Tabularum* or *Duodecim Tabulae* – the Twelve Tablets.³ This was the first step in a movement to codify the law and set it down in writing. Rome had been a small city state like Athens or Sparta. It experienced a gradual expansion of the franchise under pressure to eliminate privileges of the patrician (noble) class. These privileges upset the plebeian (common) class and this led to gradual expansion of franchise. These two tendencies, a desire to codify the law and to equalise men under the law, led, after over 200 years, to the election in 367BC of the first plebeian as a Roman consul.

Pax Romana

For over a hundred years Rome was in conflict with Carthage. There was continuing warfare and Rome won in the end in 146BC. By this time Greece was already more or less a Roman province and from this time on Rome sought more territorial expansion. The growing empire had an equalizing effect on its citizens but this was countered by the amassing of wealth which came with it and the import of slaves. The Roman middle class was driven out because slaves took on their tasks. There was a greater economic divide between wealthy and non wealthy. The proconsuls of Rome readily bribed the urban poor with bread and circuses. Given the sinfulness of men this does not surprise us and it led to social degradation and chaos. Tension, class warfare and breakdown of morality followed. The populus began to long for stability and security peace. Security of private property and predictability are needed if people are to thrive therefore they were willing to allow the Caesars to concentrate political power in the hands of one man. So Julius Caesar and then Octavian became emperors. An extensive system of civil servants, a bureaucracy grew up with the centralisation of power in the emperor to provide a unified administration for the empire. The growth of Rome and the provision of settled order came with this. But this unity came with the loss of personal freedom. For sake of law and order people gave up freedoms and independence. The securing of widespread unity throughout empire was by means of military might – it was enforced by a military threat. This was the famous *Pax Romana*, supposedly the glory of the Roman Empire.

Gradually in Roman society the absolute authority of the father was mitigated by legal rights being granted to sons and wives and even slaves could be emancipated under certain circumstances. Earlier, under the Republic, a father had such absolute authority that he could execute his own children. Wives had no rights at all. There had been a distinction between law valid for a Roman Citizen and law for other territories of the empire but this was gradually superseded by a law which was valid for all men. Rome had had one law for citizens of Rome and another for other territories' citizens originally. Now a higher law developed for unity, stability and predictably throughout the empire. These were the advantages of *Pax Romana*, universal law and widening of citizenship.

³ You can read what these laws were here: <http://www.historyguide.org/ancient/12tables.html>

Sadly this was purchased at a cost: the peace of Rome was granted by the messianic, deified emperor.

Exercise:

If you have a synchronological chart you will be able to trace the developments in this lesson and get a good perspective on the events and movements described. Take some time to study the chart and see how everything fits in.

Read this information: <https://mrdowling.com/documents/702-patricians.pdf> and do the exercise that goes with it to broaden your understanding of Roman society. (The material was designed for American students, you do not have to do the parts relating to the USA government unless you particularly want to.) You will remember the story of Cincinnatus from Term 1 Week 7 Day 3.