

Preacher's Pen points

Roman Soldiers



The coming of Jesus and the establishment of the church took place during the time of the mighty Roman Empire. That empire was built upon the backs of its great army and often in the Scripture we see references to Roman soldiers in their respective ranks.

The Roman Legions

In the Roman army soldiers were grouped in units of eight men called a “contubernium”. Ten of these units, though consisting of only 80 men, was called a “century” and the commander of the group was a “centurion”. The combination of six centuries was called a “cohort”, having 480 men. A “legion” consisted of nine cohorts of 480 men along with an additional leading cohort of 800 men. A “legion” then consisted of roughly five thousand soldiers. However, the legions were often accompanied by others such as messengers, doctors, cooks, engineers and catapult makers. Thus, a fully staffed “legion” might contain as many as a six thousand men. In addition to “legionnaires” there were also auxiliary armies raised among the subject peoples of Rome.

Roman Soldiers in the New Testament

The NT contains a number of references to Roman soldiers who participated in events connected with Jesus and His church. Both Matthew and Luke report the healing of a centurion’s son near Capernaum and Jesus’ remarkable statement that this Gentile soldier had shown more faith than He had seen among the Jews (Mt. 8:10). Since Jesus was crucified by the Romans, a centurion supervised His execution. The centurion gave details to Pilate about Jesus’ death and later commented when he saw the events surrounding

Jesus’ death, “*Certainly this man was innocent*” (Lk. 23:47). A noble “*centurion of the Italian cohort*” named Cornelius was the first Gentile to hear and obey the gospel (Ac. 10:1). When Paul was mobbed by the Jews, Claudius Lysias a “*chiliarch*” (commander of a thousand) was responsible for him (Ac. 21:31ff). Later Julius, a “*centurion of the Augustan cohort*”, was charged with transporting Paul on his journey by ship to Rome (Ac. 27:1). Paul mentions in his letters that, during the period of his house arrest in Rome, the gospel had been made known “*to the whole Praetorian Guard*” (Phil. 1:13), a large division of nine cohorts who served in the city of Rome. If the translation is correct, Paul was indicating that his imprisonment had led to the opportunity for thousands of soldiers to know about Jesus Christ.

A Comparison to the Roman Legions

However, of all references to the Roman military there is one that can be especially appreciated. When Simon sought to defend the Lord with a sword against the mobs that came to arrest Him, Jesus asked him, “*Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?*” (Mt. 26:53). No one familiar with the Roman armies could miss the power of the truth Jesus spoke. He could have called not only “ten thousand angels”, as we commonly sing, but in keeping with our study over seven times that many! Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that He was not being captured and killed because of a lack of protectors, but because He was freely giving up His life for them (and for us). Let’s not forget that when we break bread together.

—Johnny Felker (www.truthchasers.com)