

The Political & Spiritual Zeitgeist During the Incarnation: Pohl's "Tiberius"; Johnson's "A History of the Jews"; Greek & Hebrew Literature

- 11) Those who plea for peace at the expense of victory often misinterpret the Bible. They argue that to kill the enemy in defense of freedom is no virtue since they assume all biblical references to peace are appeals to abolish warfare. They are not.
- 12) It is important to remember the historical, political, and religious Zeitgeist at the time our Lord began His public ministry. It was A.D. 26 and the Roman Empire was under the thumb of the tyrannical recluse, Tiberius \ti-bir'-ē-us\ Caesar (42 B.C.-A.D. 37). His reign from A.D. 14-37 was one of terror causing fear to spread throughout the empire among those who served under his unstable personality.
- 13) Some background on Tiberius is helpful in understanding the intense desire the Jews had to be delivered from this man's authority and Roman rule. For this we consult:

Pohl, Frederick. "Tiberius." In *Encyclopaedia Britannica: Macropaedia*. 15th ed. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1979), 18:370-71:

Reign as emperor. The opening years of Tiberius' reign seem almost a model of wise and temperate rule. They were not without displays of force and violence, of a kind calculated to secure his power. The one remaining possible contender for the throne, Postumus \päs'-tya-mas\, was murdered, probably at Tiberius' orders. The only real threat to his power, the Roman Senate, was intimidated by the concentration of the Praetorian Guard, normally dispersed all over Italy, within marching distance of Rome. (pp. 370-71)

The most ominous and least defensible aspect of Tiberius' first years as emperor was the growth of the practice called "delation." Most crimes committed by well-to-do citizens were, under Roman law, punished in part by heavy fines and confiscations. These fines contributed in large part to the growth of the imperial treasury, but the money did not all go to the *fiscus* [Latin for the "royal treasury"]. Because there were no paid prosecutors, any citizen could act as a volunteer prosecutor and, if the person he accused was convicted, collect a share of the confiscated property. These volunteers, called *delatores* , made a profitable career of seeking out or inventing crime. Many of the prosecutions were based on rumour or falsified evidence, and there were few Romans who were so honoured or so powerful that they did not need to fear the attack of the *delatores* on any suspicion, or on none at all.

In AD 23 Tiberius' son died. Young Drusus \drü'-sas\ had not been loved by his father and seems not to have earned much love. Nevertheless, his death saddened Tiberius. From then on he spared less and less thought to the work of the empire.

More and more he delegated his authority in the actual running of affairs over to the man he had entrusted with the important command of the Praetorian Guard, Sejanus \si-jä'-nas\. Before long it was Sejanus who ruled Rome, and Tiberius was emperor only in name.

Ironically, the death of Drusus, the event that brought Sejanus to power, may have been Sejanus' own doing. Apparently Sejanus seduced the wife of the younger Drusus, Livilla \liv'-ē-a\, and induced her to become his accomplice in murdering her husband. In AD 27 [the second year of the Lord's public ministry], at the age of 67, Tiberius left Rome to visit some of the southern parts of Italy. En route he paused to go to the island of Capri \kä'-prē\. His intention appears to have been only to stay for a time, but he never returned to Rome.

It is the remaining decade or so of Tiberius' life that has given rise to the legend of Tiberius the monster. It seems probable that Tiberius, never handsome, had become repulsively ugly at about the time of his removal to Capri. First his skin broke out in blotches, and then his complexion became covered with pus-filled eruptions, exuding a bad smell and causing a good deal of pain. He built himself a dozen great villas ringing Capri, with prisons, underground dungeons, torture chambers, and places of execution. He filled his villas with treasure and art objects of every kind and with the enormous retinue appropriate to a Caesar: servants, guards, entertainers, philosophers, astrologers, musicians, and seekers after favour. His favorite entertainments were cruel and obscene. Even under the most favourable interpretation, he killed ferociously and almost at random. It is probable that by then his mind was disordered.

He had not, however, lost touch with the real world. He came to realize just how strong he had made Sejanus and how weak he had left himself. In AD 31 **[two years following the crucifixion of Christ]** he had allowed himself to be elected consul of Rome for a fifth time and had chosen as his co-consul Sejanus. He gave Sejanus permission to marry Livilla, the widow of Tiberius' son, Drusus. Now Sejanus not only had the substance of power but its forms as well. Golden statues were erected to him. His birthday was declared a holiday. Animals were sacrificed in his honour.

But Tiberius had come to fear and mistrust him. With the aid of Macro \ma'-krō\, Sejanus' successor as commander of the Praetorians, Tiberius smuggled a letter to the Senate denouncing Sejanus and called for his execution. The Senate was shocked and taken aback by the swift change, but it complied instantly. Sejanus woke that morning the most powerful man in the Western world, but by nightfall he was dead and his body lay, covered with spittle, by the Tiber.

Apparently Tiberius now reached a peak of denunciation and torture and execution that lasted for the remaining six years of his life. In the course of this reign of terror his *delatores* and torturers found evidence for him of the murder of his son, Drusus, by Livilla and Sejanus. Many great Roman names were implicated, falsely, or not, and while that inquisition lasted no one on Capri was safe.

Tiberius' chief remaining concern for the empire was who would rule it when he was gone. His choice was Gaius Caesar, still a young boy and known by the nickname the Roman legions had given him when he was a camp mascot, Caligula \ka-lig'-ya-la\, or Little Boots. If his morals and habits were less attractive, Tiberius did not seem to mind. "I am nursing a viper in Rome's bosom," Tiberius observed, and named Caligula his adopted son and successor.

On March 15 AD 37, Tiberius took part in a ceremonial game that required him to throw a javelin. He wrenched his shoulder, took to his bed, became very ill, and lapsed into a coma.

His physicians, who had not been allowed to examine him for nearly half a century, now studied his emaciated body and declared that he would die within the day. The successor, Caligula, was sent for. The Praetorian Guard declared their support for the new emperor. The news of the succession was proclaimed to the world. Then Tiberius recovered consciousness, sat up, and asked for something to eat. Caligula fled in terror. The notables of Rome, hasty to declare their fidelity to the new Caesar, were thrown into confusion. Only the Praetorian commander, Macro, kept his head. The next day, March 16, he hurried to Tiberius' bed, caught up a heap of blankets, and smothered Tiberius with them. (p. 371)

- 14) Our Lord's public ministry occurred not only in the reign of Tiberius but also during a time of theological controversies in Judea. Background on how political and religious events influenced the Zeitgeist of Jerusalem during the Lord's public ministry is provided by:

Johnson, Paul. *A History of the Jews*. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1987), 120-25:

It is important to grasp that the apparent Jewish revolt against Rome was at bottom a clash between Jewish and Greek culture. Moreover, the clash arose from books. There were then only two great literatures, the Greek and the Jewish, for Latin texts, modeled on the Greek were only just beginning to constitute a corpus. More and more people were literate, especially Greeks and Jews, who had elementary schools. Writers were emerging as personalities: we know the names of as many as 1,000 Hellenistic authors, and Jewish writers too were beginning to identify themselves. There were now great libraries, state as well as private. Greek was the literature of international civilized society, but the Jews were far more assiduous at copying, circulating, reading and studying their own sacred texts.

Indeed, in many respects Hebrew literature was far more dynamic than Greek. Greek texts, from Homer onwards, were guides to virtue, decorum and modes of thought; but the Hebrew texts had a marked tendency to become plans for action. Moreover, this dynamic element was becoming more important. It was propagandist in intent, polemical in tone and thoroughly xenophobic, with particular animosity directed towards the Greeks. The stress on martyrdom was notable. (p. 120)

Even more important than the martyr stories was the new literary device of apocalyptic. The word means 'revelation.' Apocalyptic texts attempt to convey mysteries beyond the bounds of normal human knowledge or experience. From the second century BC onwards, under the stress of the Maccabee crisis, they concentrate overwhelmingly on eschatological themes: they carry the Jewish obsession with history into the future and predict what will happen at 'the end of days', when God winds up the historical period and mankind enters the era of summation. This moment will be characterized by great cosmic convulsions, a final battle of Armageddon and, as one of the Qumran scrolls puts it, 'the heavenly host will give forth in great voice, the foundations of the world will be shaken, and a war of the mighty ones of the heavens will spread throughout the world'. These events are characterized by extreme violence, by absolute divisions between good (pious Jews) and evil (Greeks, later Romans) and by hints of imminence. (pp. 120-21)