

FIRST-CENTURY ROMAN GOVERNMENT

BY GEORGE H. GUTHRIE

TRADITION has it that in 753 B.C., about the same time the Hebrew prophet Amos hurled his sermons against the Northern Kingdom, a man named Romulus established a small settlement on the banks of the Tiber River. This event could not have had more far-reaching historical significance. By the mid-first century A.D. the city of Rome would boast a population of over one million and lead an empire spanning continents. Living among its citizens were between forty and sixty thousand Jews whose community had formed a significant segment of Roman society for over one hundred years.¹ Many were Roman citizens, spoke Greek, and were called by Greek names.² Acts 2:10 reports that among those at the first recorded preaching of the gospel were Jews from Rome; likely some of these people converted to Christianity and re-

turned to the empire's capital, establishing the church there.

When Paul wrote his Letter to the Romans in about A.D. 57, that great city—a city the apostle himself had never visited—had seen the rise of the Emperor Nero. Most Christians today know Nero for his atrocious persecution of Roman Christians in the mid-60s. Yet political reforms and stability characterized the first five years of his reign. Our understanding of this initial stage of Nero's rule provides an important contextual backdrop for interpreting Romans 13:1-14, in which Paul encouraged the Roman believers to subject themselves to the governing authorities.

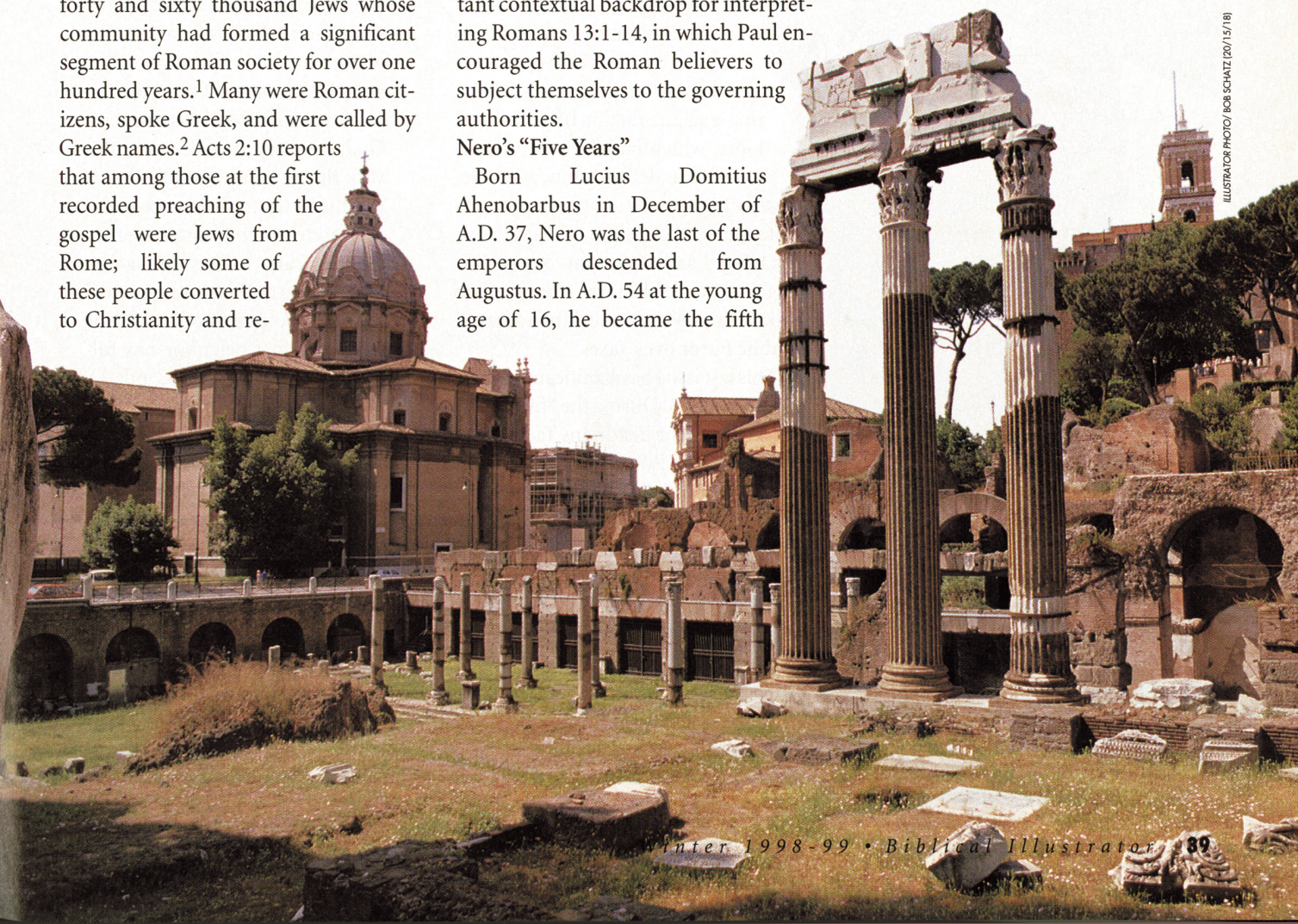
Nero's "Five Years"

Born Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus in December of A.D. 37, Nero was the last of the emperors descended from Augustus. In A.D. 54 at the young age of 16, he became the fifth

Princeps ("first citizen") of the Roman Empire.³ Nero's mother Agrippina, Augustus's great-granddaughter and widow of the Emperor Claudius, was the driving force behind the young ruler during the first months of his government. According to rumors, she had had

Below: Caesar's Forum and Temple of Venus in Rome.

Lesson Reference:
FBS: Romans 13:1-14



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (2/15/18)

Claudius poisoned to speed her only son's accession.⁴ Signs of her influence may be seen in that the Senate was called to meet in the palace so that Agrippina could listen to the proceedings from behind a screen. Also, coinage from the first year of Nero's rule depicts the heads of Agrippina and her son facing one another. Eventually, however, the emperor chafed under his mother's control, lessened her influence,

and finally had her murdered in A.D. 59.⁵

After the initial months under Agrippina's control, Nero proclaimed his ancestor Augustus as his political model and looked to two advisors: Seneca, brother of Gallio whom Paul encountered as governor of Greece (Acts 18:12), and Burrus, the prefect of the praetorian guards. The Empire settled into a period known as "the five years," which some poets contemporary to Nero describe as a "Golden Age."⁶ During this time the young emperor attempted to better public order by a number of reforms.

Forgery, bribery, and malicious, politically-motivated prosecutions were all renounced by Nero in his first speech before the Senate. He forbade provincial governors and their staffs to take large amounts of money from local populations in order to fund gladiatorial exhibitions. Furthermore, he spoke against the killing of gladiators and criminals in public arenas.⁷ Nero committed also to end the practice of wielding imperial jurisdiction behind closed doors, which had led to improper influence under Claudius, and to restrict his jurisdiction to an appropriate sphere of oversight.⁸ Finally, Nero, having heard constant complaints against tax collectors, attempted to abolish or lower certain kinds of taxes.

Public Furor over Taxes

This last issue has significant bearing on Romans 13. During the "five years," according to the historians Tacitus and Suetonius, the Roman citizenry was in a constant state of unrest over the topic of taxation. There are two kinds of taxes mentioned in Romans 13. The word *phorous* in Romans 13:6 refers to direct taxes such as property and poll taxes.

Left: Draped female statue (15-59 A.D.), wife of Emperor Claudius and mother of Nero.

Above: Poppaea, wife of Nero. A Roman Tetradrachm from Egypt.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ DAVID ROGERS/ MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM/ MILWAUKEE (381/28A)

Right: Fabricinium Bridge connecting Tiber Island to the left bank in Rome.



Indirect taxes, the *telos* of 13:7, were those imposed for tolls or sales of slaves or other properties or goods.⁹ This latter form of taxation drew the most heated attention in the debates over the government's system.

The Senate argued against Nero's desire to abolish custom taxes because such an action would lead to the call for further tax reductions from the people but would, in fact, require that taxes be raised in other areas. Thus, it was a thorny issue and a hot topic of public conversation at both the "street" level and in the highest offices of power. The issue came to a head in A.D. 58. Therefore, if Romans is dated in A.D. 57, Paul wrote the book during a period when his addressees were at least to, if not caught up in, that public discussion. Paul's words of Romans 13:5-8 were first read in this political and social atmosphere:

Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor. Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law (NASB, '95 Update).

Certainly those in the Christian community of Rome had felt the burden and injustice of the tax collectors' impositions. Perhaps some were tempted to join the public furor, protesting against such dishonest gain by refusing to pay certain taxes. "Is not God a God of justice?" they might have reasoned. "Surely He would not support a government that burdens its people so; and neither will we." Paul's admonitions in Romans 13:5-8 hint that such rumblings were heard in the church.

Nero's Dark Years

Both Nero's personal and political lives started to go downhill in A.D. 62. Burrus died in A.D. 62 of a throat tumor (some suspected poisoning) and was succeeded by Faenius Rufus and the evil genius Gaius Ofonius Tigellinus, a Sicilian who encouraged the darkest vices of the youthful ruler. Seneca found Tigellinus and the increasingly difficult Nero too demanding to work with and resigned from his position, later being commanded to take his own life. Also in A.D. 62 Nero had his wife Octavia murdered so he could marry a woman named Poppaea. He started to perform publicly in certain poetry readings in A.D. 64, an activity deemed highly improper by Roman citizens. He also participated in drinking, sexual exploits, and other forms of revelry.¹⁰

The emperor faced a severe crisis in

the burning of Rome in A.D. 64. He was accused of the fire, some believing he set it intentionally to clear an area for a new palace called the "Golden House." Many families were left without homes, and the city erupted with widespread discontent.¹¹ The historian Tacitus, who disdained the Christian movement as a vile superstition, described how Nero sought to shift blame to the followers of Christ.

To suppress this rumor [that he himself had caused the burning of Rome in 64], Nero created scapegoats. He punished with exquisite cruelty the notoriously depraved group whom the populace called Christians. The originator of the group, Christ, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator Pontius Pilate. Yet, in spite of such a temporary setback, this pernicious superstition broke out again, not only in Judea, the origin of this mischief, but even in

the City [Rome], where all degraded and shameful practices collected from all over and became the vogue. First, Nero arrested self-acknowledged members of this sect. Then, on the information they supplied, large numbers [*multitudo ingens*] were condemned, not so much for their arson as for their alleged hatred of the human race. Their deaths were made a farce so that despite their guilt and the ruthless punishment they deserved, there arose pity, for it was felt that they were being sacrificed to one man's brutality rather than to the public interest.¹²

In this context Tacitus described the tortures in horrifying detail. Some of the believers who would not renounce their faith were covered with animal skins and torn to pieces by dogs. Others were nailed to crosses and set on fire, lighting Nero's public gardens. All this was done in a festive atmosphere in which the

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (20/22/4)



Christians were publicly humiliated; Nero himself dressed up as a charioteer, driving about the city in a chariot like a commoner. His actions were so outrageous, the general public grew sympathetic to the believers.

Questions of Interpretation

How Romans 13:1-14 is handled in the process of interpretation is of utmost importance, for it has often been forced into the service of oppressive regimes to suppress protest or further their own agendas.¹³ Was Paul calling for unreserved subjection to the governing authorities in this passage? Did he essentially equate the will of the state with the will of God? When he called the government a “minister of good” and a “minister of God,” how did such a view fit with the latter reign of terror enacted by Nero in A.D. 64? Would Paul have expressed himself the same way some seven years after he wrote Romans, when believers were being used as human torches and

for public sport in inhumane displays of violence?

First, Jesus and the earliest Christians uniformly expressed a common-sense respect for the governing authorities as necessary for social order.¹⁴ Jesus said, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s” (Matt. 22:21; Mark 12:17; Luke 20:25). This posture of living responsibly under the laws of the state affirms that the government’s role of punishing evil and awarding good is a valid, God-given role (Rom. 13:1-4; 1 Pet. 2:14). The practice of living righteously also helps advance the gospel, affirming the difference God makes in one’s life and silencing those who wish to discredit the Christian movement (Rom. 13:8-14; 1 Pet. 2:15). The New Testament, therefore, affirms the state as an institution.

Romans 13:1-14 should be read in this light. Paul, perhaps aware of the civil unrest in Rome over the question of taxes, reminded the believers there that devotion to God provides no excuse for disregarding the honor and taxes rightfully due that government. The Christian must not reason, “This government dishonors God; therefore, I will dishonor this government.” Such a position disregards the government’s valid role in keeping social order and exposes the church to unneeded criticism. On the contrary, when a believer lives well, behaving properly within the moral guidelines of the Lord (Rom. 13:8-14) and thus the laws of the state, evil people have no valid reason for criticizing our message.

Second, however, this general guideline for living within the laws of the government, as found in Romans 13:1-14, does not address the state’s dark side. Human institutions, because they are human, are vulnerable to devastating expressions of evil. Paul certainly was aware of the atrocious moral corruptness of the Roman emperors and

their governments. The admonitions to submit to the government do not encourage uncritical and unlimited obedience. Christians cannot give to the state what belongs to God. What we know of Paul’s life shows that he would never encourage believers to confess, “Caesar is Lord” and “anathema Jesus.”¹⁵ Thus if Paul had addressed the Romans in the context of Nero’s heated persecution of A.D. 64, he would have encouraged them along two lines. They still would have been called to live morally according to the laws of the land that existed to provide basic social structure. But Paul would call them, even in the face of the government’s “sword,” to hold to the basic Christian confession, “Jesus is Lord;” for to Jesus alone belongs our ultimate allegiance. Submission to government must be understood within the framework of bowing the knee to Christ. We submit to government because we are submitted to Christ. When the government commands us to cease submitting to Jesus, we cease submitting to that government.

¹James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1988), xlv-xlvi.

²F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 137.

³Miriam T. Griffin, “Nero” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, David Noel Freedman, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1076.

⁴Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 26.

⁵B. H. Warmington, *Nero: Reality and Legend* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1969), 43-46.

⁶Griffin, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1076.

⁷Michael Grant, *The Roman Emperors: A Biographical Guide to the Rulers of Imperial Rome, 31 B.C.—A.D. 476* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1985), 35.

⁸Griffin, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1077.

⁹J. A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 669; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16, Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 766.

¹⁰Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, 36-37; Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 27.

¹¹Grant, *The Roman Emperors*, 38.

¹²*Annales* 15.44 as quoted in Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 35.

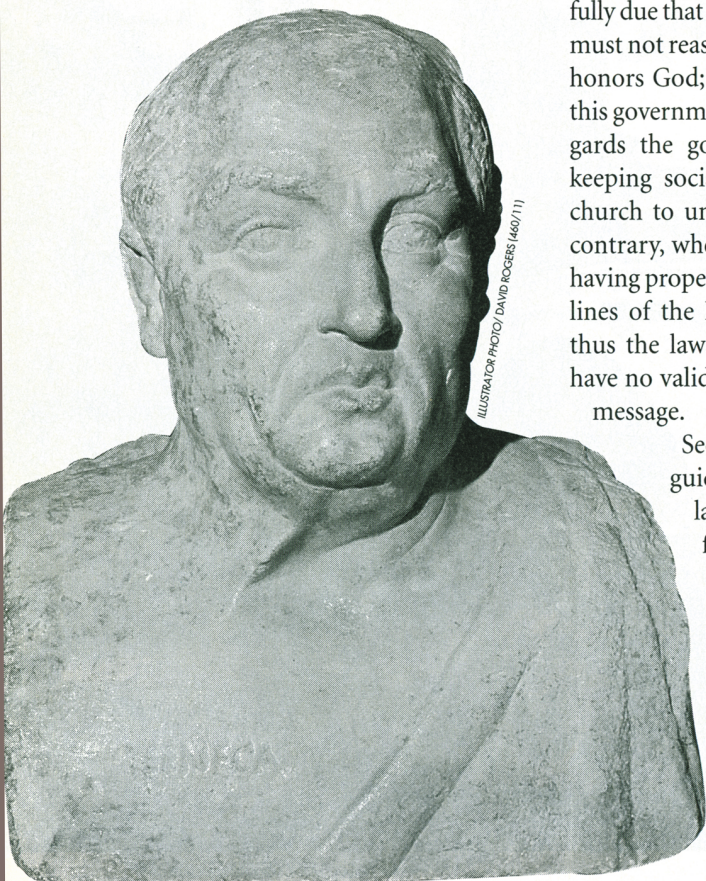
¹³J. I. H. McDonald, “Romans 13:1-7: A Test Case for New Testament Interpretation,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989): 540.

¹⁴Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 759.

¹⁵Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956), 64-65.

George Guthrie is assistant professor of religion and philosophy and department chair, Union University, Jackson, Tennessee.

Below: Seneca from a late Roman copier, found in 1813 in the villa Mattei in Rome.
Right: A first-century marketplace in Rome.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS (460/11)