

The City of Rome in Bible Times

Rome was founded on the Tiber river in 753 B.C. It soon spread to cover seven hills, which were : Capitoline, Palatine, Aventine, Caelian, Esquiline, Viminal, and Quirinal. The Roman Forum lay between the Palatine and Capitoline hills and was the center of Roman cultural, civic, and commercial activities.

The finest of Rome's temples, palaces, circuses, baths, monuments, amphitheaters, and imperial buildings were near the Forum. All Roman life centered in this area, and all roads in the empire radiated from the golden milestone located in the Forum. Paul, Peter, and Luke must have been in the forum often; and here Paul may have been tried for his life. The dust and dirt of centuries cover this area now; and earthquake, fire, and time have taken their toll.

There were excavations in Rome as early as the 16th century, with extensive archaeological work being done since then. In the late 19th century, the Pontifical Commission of Sacred Archaeology took up the work and have continued to oversee it until the present.

Ancient Rome was a sumptuous and magnificent city. There are many descriptions in history of its magnificence. The Forum measures 240 by 690 feet and was the scene of the trial and death of Julius Caesar and the oration of Mark Antony. The Colosseum, covering six acres, seated 60,000 spectators at gladiatorial contests in which Christians were thrown to wild beasts. The palaces of the emperor and the temple of Jupiter were on the Palatine Hill. More than 250,000 people could watch chariot races at the Circus Maximus.

Near the Forum can be seen the Arch of Titus (Vespasian) which has a sculptured relief of Titus and his legions carrying the sacred vessels from the Temple in Jerusalem after the siege of 70 A.D. Of course, this had not been built when the apostle Paul was alive. Also, the Arch of Constantine is in the area and tells of Constantine's proclamation of 316 A.D. in which he announced that Christianity was to be the official religion of the empire. During the ex-

cavation, in 1941, of Ostia, Rome's seaport at the mouth of the Tiber, an inscription was found indicating that in 14 A.D., during the reign of Tiberius, Rome had a population of over 4 million.

Of all the discoveries in and around Rome, the most interesting to Christians and Jews are the Catacombs which lay along the roadways outside the city, but which are never farther than three miles from the old city walls. The origin of these Catacombs is one of the strangest phases of history. They started out as sand pits discovered and exploited by people who needed building materials. The material was actually a combination of volcanic ash and sand, melted enough to cause the particles to adhere to each other. This tufa stone comprised the earth's surface for miles around Rome and was excellent when used in masonry. Many subterranean channels were dug in "mining" this sand.

During the first century, there came tremendous conflict between the young Church and the Roman Empire. The marked characteristic of the empire was tolerance; and the most notable characteristics of the Christian church were its love and benevolence. So, you would think the two would have gotten along well together. They did not, however, because the Christians swore allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord of the lives, and everything else was expected to be subservient to Him. Of course the Romans did not like this.

Also, the church had high standards for moral conduct, and they called for conformity to these standards. They said, "If you expect to be saved, you must conform to Christ's way of life." This was resented. The church condemned the world and sought to save it, but from the world there came contempt and aversion, followed by persecution.

The Christians were also thought to be very unsocial people. They were considered strange, and were hated as enemies of society. They were simple and moral in their dress, they would not go to games and feasts, they condemned those who sold fodder for the animals which were to be sacrificed

to pagan gods. The public began to dread them because they thought the gods would be angry and cause their crops to fail if too many people refused to make offerings. If crops failed, if the Tiber river overflowed, if plagues came, the cry was “Send the Christians to the lions!” Yet the Christians were kind to all who were in trouble, stayed and nursed the sick during the plague when others fled, and lived highly moral lives.

In order to test people’s loyalty, the Roman government required that every one appear at certain public places and there burn a pinch of incense to the emperor. The Christians considered this emperor worship, and they wished to worship only Christ. So government authorities began to seek them out and punish them with death. As a protective measure the Christians began to meet and work in secret. They sought refuge in the underground sand pits. With their tools they hollowed out rooms, chapels, and burying places. The Catacombs became their place of safe retreat. They came to live there, to worship there, and were buried there, by the tens of thousands.

The Catacombs were discovered, and excavations

begun, in the 16th century. Since 1950 they have been excavated very extensively. Enough information has been gathered to fill many books. About six million people are buried in about sixty Catacombs, fifty-four of which are Christian, and six of which are Jewish. Each of these has an obscure entrance from which a stairway leads down to tunnels and galleries which branch off in all directions creating a network of tunnels and streets on as many as four levels connected by stairways. On each level is an immense maze of tunnels - so that in all there are about 587 miles of tunnels.

Along the walls of these passageways, or at dead ends, the Christians are buried in wall tombs. Each tomb is closed with tiles or with a marble slab on which the name, and perhaps a portrait, of the deceased appears. Often the walls and ceilings were decorated with paintings of Bible characters, or scenes such as Moses striking the rock, David, Daniel, Noah, or Jonah — in each case they represented a miraculous deliverance by God. In 1853, the archaeologist DeRossi found a marble slab with the engraving, “Marcus Antonius Rastutus made this sepulchre for himself and his own, who are confident in the Lord.”