



# PRESERVING BIBLE TIMES<sup>inc.</sup>

Because Context Matters

## *Paul Engages the Roman World*

### Glimpses into a Remarkable Trip

On May 5, 2014, 30 friends of PBT (and appreciators of biblical context) left for southern Italy on a 10-day contextual immersion experience to engage Paul's Roman world. What a trip it was! The words fabulous, spectacular, beautiful, enriching, eye-opening, transforming, challenging, paradigm expanding all come to mind as we explored this missing piece (and well-kept secret – until now!) of biblical context.

This Reflection tries to capture some of what we saw, learned, and experienced from our teaching team as we spent time at 23 sites during this ground-breaking trip. As the old saying goes, “*you had to be there*” to truly appreciate the experience. The written word cannot adequately capture the spectacular scenery of the **Sorrentine** peninsula and the **Amalfi** coast, the breathtaking beauty of the Isle of **Capri**, the immensity of the **Pompeii** experience, the amazement of strolling through first-century **Herculaneum**, walking on the 2,000 year old Appian Way in **Minturno** (literally in Paul's footsteps), standing in devotional silence where Paul was held in house arrest at **San Paulo alla Regola**, being within 100 feet of where Paul was beheaded at (what is now) the **Abbey of Three Fountains**, and more.

This Reflection gives you some glimpses into the teaching/learning aspects of our trip. There's just not enough space to cover all of it, let alone describe the places we stayed, the meals we shared, the sunsets we watched, the fun and laughter of our times together, the daily gelato routine, the beauty of Rome and Italy, and the serendipity moments that arose.

**Compare and Contrast** To those familiar with Israel, there were many comparisons and contrasts of this *Paul's Roman World* experience with the Israel Holy Land experience.

- **Trees versus shrubs** – The towering canopies of the umbrella pines in southern Italy provide a lovely shade over many of the first-century sites we visited. This is in stark contrast to the lack of tall trees (and shade) in Israel.
- A **green lushness** in Italy compared to the **dry, brown, earthen landscape** of much of Israel.
- Food – **pasta** for lunch instead of **falafel!** And lots of gelato breaks.
- In Israel we “**connect the dots.**” In Italy we have to first develop the dots before we can biblically connect them, which just adds to the breadth and depth of the learning experience.
- In Israel we have communion at the Garden Tomb. In Italy we have silent reflection in one of the rooms of the house where Paul most likely stayed while under house arrest.
- In Israel we have the **Temple Mount** as the center of religious life. In Rome we have the **Forum**.
- Jews worshiped in the **Synagogues**. Gentile believers worshiped in **house churches** meeting in the atriums of villas owned by wealthy Roman converts.
- Jews were always looking for **Messiah**. The Romans always looked to Caesar as their messiah – Augustus considered himself to be born from the gods.
- In Israel we ponder people who were **conquered**. In Italy we deal with those who did the **conquering**.

- In Israel we mostly focus on **biblical history**. In Italy we focus as much on **world history** as we do on the biblical history of the first-century Gentile church.
- In Israel you find mostly profiles of **rock ruins** that give you a hint at what was there 2,000 years ago. In Italy you can see cities and villas (with walls and roofs) **still standing**, e.g. Pompeii, Herculaneum, Oplontis, Boscoreale, Maritime villas such as Villa Arianna, which provides a much more complete picture of the life and times of that day.
- In Israel the words and deeds of **Jesus** come alive. In Italy the writings of **Paul** contextually come off the page with fresh understanding.
- The **scale of the sites** in Italy is so much greater than in Israel. Ostia Antica (the New Testament port of Rome) is an 80 acre site. Pompeii is 180+ acres. Even the largest Israel sites are so much smaller.
- In Italy we developed the **Roman worldview** as it shaped the issues that Paul confronts in his Epistles. In Israel the emphasis is on the **Jewish village, agrarian worldview** of the Gospels.
- It was **less crowded in Italy** compared to Israel. Except for the Coliseum, the Vatican and Pompeii, we seldom saw other people at the Pauline sites. Half of the time we were the only bus in the parking lot. So different from Israel which is much more crowded.

In summary, Italy and Israel are two very different experiences. Yet both are rich when it comes to expanding our understanding of biblical context and more fully appreciating what Jesus was teaching about the Kingdom of God and what Paul was addressing in his “how should we then live”<sup>1</sup> issues to new Christians in a pagan world.

### **Our Purpose<sup>2</sup>**

Given the dynamics of our current culture, more than ever we need to understand the message (and therefore the original meaning) of the New Testament. All of Paul’s Epistles and Letters were written in the context of the Roman world and its populace. Even though the content of Paul’s writings is timelessly meant for the world, their perspective is uniquely Roman. And the best place to engage that context is studying the relevant historical relics/remains found from Rome south to Naples.

As an example, consider the theatre imagery (1 Cor. 13:1) and meat market arguments (1 Cor. 8-10) Paul uses in his letter to the Corinthian church. Paul knows those images are very familiar to his readers. You can travel to Corinth today and see the archaeological remains of the theatre and the outline of the meat market, or you can go to southern Italy and see fuller representations of both. You can visit first-century Colossae and see very little of what’s left of that city (a few rocks in an unexcavated field). Or you can go to Pompeii (Bay of Naples) and see a 180-acre restored first-century city (that Colossae was modeled on), which is “petrified in place” by the volcanic ash from Mt. Vesuvius, leaving hundreds of buildings still with their walls, roofs, atriums, triclinium dining rooms, frescos, and more still in place.

Part of Rome’s strategy in creating a unified empire from very diverse people groups was to have all of its cities designed on the same template. Thus the Forums are going to be uniform throughout the Empire; likewise the theaters and amphitheaters. Villas will all exhibit the same characteristics. The width of the roads/streets and the cuts in the stepping stones of the streets (to allow the wagons/chariots to pass) are going to be the same in every city in the Empire. The Temples to Jupiter are all going to be in the same place around the respective Forums. That’s Rome’s way of making you feel Roman and at “home” no matter where you are in the Empire.

The implications of this Roman uniformity means that all the images Paul draws upon in his writings can be seen in one geographical area – the 120 miles from Rome south to the Bay of Naples. In fact almost everything we know today about the Roman world of the NT can be observed at several sites (we visit them all!) within a one-day’s drive south of Rome.

If you want to get more miles per gallon in your contextual understanding of what Paul was dealing with in his Epistles (and the images he draws upon to make his points), come to this first-century epicenter of the Roman world. That’s why we created the “*Paul’s Response to the Roman World*” contextual immersion study trip. It allows us to engage Paul’s Roman context more intensely and in less time (more efficient because it’s so compact), and with much shorter bus rides (which makes for a more relaxing day)! Plus, you see much more (and better understand) the cultural realities and images that made perfect sense to Paul but may not make sense

to a modern reader. This ten-day study trip intentionally addresses a very significant missing piece of biblical context in a very effective and efficient way. You can take a typical “Paul’s Journey’s” trip and see pieces of the Roman World puzzle, or come to southern Italy and experience the whole pizza (what did you expect me to say – the whole enchilada?!) The trip’s 162-page study notebook, a gem by itself, significantly adds to the learning experience as it helps you remember and integrate what you’ve seen and heard. And if that’s not enough, you get all the beauty and ambiance of southern Italy thrown in as a bonus!

**Topical Overview** To facilitate our contextual learning objectives, we wove three themes together: 1) What was the Roman worldview and daily life like in the first-century? 2) What faith and body life issues did that create for Paul in his writings? 3) What was his time in Rome like? Thus, the following themes were developed: *Stepping Back into the Roman World...Paul in the World that was Rome...Paul and His Epistles...Emperors and Empire...Playboys, Pagans and Philosophers...A Spectacular Civilization...Paul’s Visits in Rome...From Empire to World Faith*

**Our Approach** Foundational to understanding Paul’s Epistles is knowing the Roman world of Paul’s day. On this study program, we developed how Rome created a common identity throughout its empire. This gives us cultural clues that shape the imagery Paul uses. It also includes Rome’s “franchise” template approach to Empire uniformity by:

- Consistency of urban spaces so that every city in its Empire looks like every other.
- Standardizing social dress so you can always recognize a person’s status in society.
- Creating a social system rooted in benefactors.
- Creating common icons and monuments in every city.
- Creation and refinement of prescribed public spectacles so you can relive the past glories of Rome no matter where you reside in the Empire.
- Defining the layout of homes with public and private spaces as well as status icons.
- A common legal system that re-enforced and protected the rights of Roman citizens everywhere.
- A uniform system of major and minor gods, household gods, cults, temples, shrines, and rituals which made everyone “religious” and encouraged them to put their “faith” in the State. But it was a “religion” devoid of any morality. Rome also interwove “religion” and patriotism as two threads of the same cord. To be “religious” was to demonstrate your Roman patriotism. All of this was intended to 1) communicate that Rome always brings order out of chaos, which is why “we” are such an exceptional culture and 2) re-enforce the conviction that “it’s good to be a Roman!” This notion of Roman exceptionalism fostered a belief that what was good for the State was more important than what was good for the family. Such a cultural backdrop gives rise to many of the issues and images found in Paul’s writings.

**Sanctifying Substitutions** Some of the fascinating themes we pondered were: What happens when the Gospel comes to Rome? What happens when –

- Monotheism comes to a polytheistic culture? The Roman view of gods was that they were not trying to help you. In fact they were inclined to be against you. So you had to placate the gods in your “religious” practice with sacrifices and vows to keep bad things from happening in your life. Contrast that with the Christian message that God loves you. He is for you and on your side! He doesn’t “mess” with you; in fact He wants to know you and reveal Himself to you.
- A “We are all one in Christ” body life message is brought to a status dominated culture?
- People accustomed to sexual pleasure and entertainment spectacle are being challenged to exhibit personal piety as one of the hallmarks of their faith?
- Ancestor worship (big in Roman Culture) confronts a “your ancestors won’t be in Heaven if they did not believe in Jesus” realization?
- Pagan cultic practices are condemned and Christian “worship” is instituted?

You get the idea! There were enormous challenges to bringing the Gospel to the Roman world.

You'll also begin to appreciate the appeal of the Gospel in spite of what Roman culture arrayed against it. In paganism, your origin was uncertain, your purpose was not specific and your destiny was unknown. Into this mosaic of uncertainty comes the Gospel – Your origin is as a child of God, your purpose is to glorify God and your destiny is to spend eternity with Him. Another addition that Christianity brought was a social conscience for the poor and disenfranchised; e.g., the first orphanages were established by first-century Christians. That was something that Rome had no interest in pursuing.

It has been said that when Christianity took Rome, Rome took Christianity. When Christianity came to Rome it began to impact paganism. At the same time the practices of paganism began to influence how new Christian converts expressed their faith in Jesus. To say that created issues for Paul is an understatement!

Part of the challenge Paul faced was how to take pagan “religious practice” and convert it to Christian “worship.” How to keep syncretism (blending of the old and the new) from gaining a foothold so people don't worship both Jesus and Jupiter (secretly)? How to keep accustomed pagan practices from becoming part of Gentile Christianity (a timeless issue)? What is the “cohesion” strategy that binds all these new and diverse Christians together in body life as they are unglued from the cultural cohesion strategy imbedded in the psyche of their Roman mind? Said another way, how do you teach people to be Christian? How do you wean them away from ritualistic tendencies and focus them on a relationship with their Creator, teaching them that ritualistic form is not relational substance? That's (in part) why Paul wrote Colossians and Ephesians (put off – put on) and Thessalonians (here's your new value system).

We learned that the answer to this cohesion challenge was the early church's proclivity to sanctify the traditions that people were accustomed to by giving them new meanings. So while much of the pagan Roman structure, practice and routine remained, it was given new names and meaning. As a result, the early Christian movement mimics much of the way Rome unified its Empire. Thus, when the Empire breaks down the church moves into the vacuum.<sup>3</sup>

- Emperors leave the scene and Popes take their place
- Praefects leave and Cardinals take their place
- Senators become Bishops
- Orators become Priests
- Household gods get replaced by Angels
- Minor gods get replaced by Saints
- Basilicas (places of Roman record keeping and administration) become churches
- Roman Law is replaced by Canon Law
- Rituals remain, but given new meanings
- Sacrifices get replaced with offerings and votive candles
- Symbols are changed. The Greek letter *tau* ( $\tau$ ), which was a pagan fertility symbol in Roman culture, gets the top of the “t” dropped down to become the original Christian cross (+).

**New Biblical Insights**      Being immersed in Paul's Roman world turns on new lights, yielding new insights. While there are dozens and dozens of examples that can be cited, let me highlight a few:

- In Western Evangelicalism, the word **slave** quickly evokes a black, antebellum cotton plantation setting. That is not at all the Roman context for slaves. In fact slaves made up 50% of the population of the Empire. In addition to being cooks and household staff, slaves were also bookkeepers, merchants, tradesmen, teachers, physicians and civil servants. Since the Roman aristocracy despised business and administration, slaves were the civil servants who ran the Roman Empire.

Part of the genius of Rome was that a Roman slave could aspire to become a Freedman. He could earn money, save it; and, if he pleased his master, eventually buy his freedom. Thus, slaves in the Roman world had aspirational hope – a way of becoming free and moving into a higher class of society. That hope kept the lid from blowing off the Empire. The vast majority of “slaves” in the Roman world were not oppressed. In fact they were treated very much like long-term members of a

family (exceptions were the agrarian slaves and the mining slaves - the Spartacus' of that world – out in the hinterlands).

It is within this context that Paul's pastoral advice to slaves must be taken. In 1611 when the KJV translators shied away from using the word "slave" in the text (for political reasons) and substituted the word "servant," a significant translational error was introduced that very much misses the first-century contextual weight of "slave" (*dulos*) in Paul's writings. When Paul talks about being a "slave to Christ," in that Roman first-century *dulos* context, it is best understood as proactively embracing a posture of always asking 1) What does my Master want from me today? and 2) How best can I serve my Master today? So different from the relative passivity of a "slave" who only (internally begrudgingly) does what his master tells him or her to do.

- In Roman culture, men could not display their wealth since their toga dress was standardized. Not so for their wives. Thus, if you wanted to know how wealthy a man was, you looked at how ostentatiously his wife dressed and adorned herself. Thus, wealthy Roman women spent an inordinate amount of time on their appearance with special emphasis given to their hair. The amount and nature of the adornments integrated into their "hairdo" spoke volumes about the wealth and status of your husband. It is to this context that Paul brings an emphasis on piety not prominence, on simplicity not ornateness (I Tim. 2:9&10) in order that the outward appearance did not rob Jesus of His glory.
- In Ephesians Paul repeatedly uses the word "walk." When he exhorts the Ephesians in 4:1 to "*walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,*" he is evoking the image of a Forum slave market in Asia Minor. Roman law required "full disclosure" by the dealers of the slaves they were selling. Consequently, each slave in the market had a sign that hung around the neck detailing the origin, ethnicity, skills, abilities, strengths and weaknesses of the slave. It was important that the buyer knew exactly what he was getting.

Thus, Paul reminds the Ephesian believers that they were bought by Jesus and need to live up to the skills, abilities, norms, values of the Christian "sign" around their "spiritual neck" that now publically acknowledges their new life in Christ. And to make sure they provide the value commensurate with the price paid for them – the value ascribed to them by their new Master.

- The emphasis in the first-century of the Good News was on eternal life. That was revolutionary news to a pagan culture that had no definite view of an after-life; and if they did, it was not a positive one. The central appeal of the Gospel in this first-century culture was the certainty of an eternal life that was going to be indescribably wonderful. This surety of Eternity drew people who had shorter and more uncertain life spans to the Christian faith even though they would likely experience almost instant persecution (and possible death) for expressing their new faith in Jesus Christ. It seems like today much of our church message emphasis is how you can have a wonderful life on earth with much less attention and thought given to Eternity.

At *San Paulo allo Regola* outside the walls of first-century Rome, we visited a raised piece of ground where public executions took place, and where Paul most likely was beheaded. It reminded us of the cost that can come with following Jesus. At this site we learned that late in the Third Century 10,260 Roman Legionnaires were executed in one day by the Emperor because they were converts to Christianity and would no longer say vows to the god Mars before going into battle. To become a Christian was viewed as unpatriotic to the State, costing your life. (Parenthetically, in 250 AD you could lose your life for following Jesus while in 350 AD you could lose your life for NOT following Jesus!)

### **Appreciating Paul**

You will come away from being immersed in Paul's Roman world with an appreciation for the enormous task that God placed before him. By way of contrast, consider Peter who stayed

in Jerusalem. Post Pentecost, Peter's task was relatively "easy." (Cut me some slack as I develop this comparison!) "All" Peter had to communicate was that the long-awaited Messiah had come in *Yeshua*. He brought this message to a religious culture that had been looking for Messiah for centuries. Furthermore, they had their Hebrew Bible with dozens and dozens of prophetic passages pointing to *Yeshua*. He had the benefit of bringing his message to a homogeneous culture (Judaism). Peter did not have to exhort most of the people to live piously – that was already imbedded in their culture. In fact in some ways, his Gospel message made life easier for Christian believing Jews; e.g., they can continue with ritual purification baths and sacrifices at the Temple if they wish, but it is no longer necessary because Jesus has made the consummate sacrifice and has totally redefined what righteousness and purity means.

**Paul's Challenge** On the other hand, Paul's degree of difficulty in bringing the Gospel to the pagan world of the Roman Empire was much more challenging. He brings a message of monotheism to a polytheistic culture. And this One God will not tolerate other gods. Paul walks into a very diverse culture with degrees of status, including those of slaves and declares we are all one in Christ – a non-status Kingdom to a status dominated Empire. He addresses a culture accustomed to (some might argue addicted to) constant entertainment, spectacle and sensual pleasure, and brings a message extolling modesty and personal piety. He offers to make the life of the Roman believer more complicated since embracing Jesus will be seen as rejecting the State (worshiping the gods and patriotism were co-mingled). And if that is not enough, he also has to deal with the Judaizers who are nipping at his heels trying to convince new believers to sign up for the complete Jewish package of sacrifices, kosher foods, ritual purification baths, etc.

This Pauline Roman contextual immersion experience gives you a much deeper admiration for Paul. Likewise there's a renewed awareness of the power of the Holy Spirit to move in even the most difficult of cultural situations (think Islam), bringing the light of the Gospel to a dark and hopeless pagan world.

**A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words** To give you a visual feel for our ten-day study trip, we've placed two new photo albums on the Preserving Bible Times Facebook page. One album is entitled "*Paul's Response to the Roman World*" so you can see some of the sites we visited. The other is entitled "*Sorrento and Capri*" so you can appreciate some of the stunning beauty of southern Italy and the visual delights that were a part of every day. We plan to upload those images to the PBT website as well in the near future.

## Final Thoughts

- The Gospel message that Paul brought to his Roman world was profoundly radical, challenging and freeing. As easy as it would have been, he made no theological or behavioral accommodations, nor did he compromise with Roman culture to make it easier for people to accept Christ. Is that what we are offering and experiencing in our Sunday morning messages? Or have we become too timid? Too watered down! Too willing to accommodate the success-oriented, achievement-oriented, materialistic allures of our American Dream culture. Has the world forced us into (much of) its mold? Maybe the people sitting in our worship services are actually looking for a bigger call, a grander challenge.
- How do you wake up each morning? By adopting the attitude of a Roman slave (*dulos*) who is always asking, "What does my Master want from me today and how best can I serve my Master today?" Or do you adopt the relative passivity of a "slave" who only does what the Master tells him/her to do.
- Is our greatest concern for today the culture we are facing or equipping the church to effectively engage our (secular, pagan) culture? There were many things about the Roman culture of the First Century that were deplorable from a Christian perspective. The challenge that Paul and the early church faced was "how shall we then live" as light, salt, leaven to (magnetically) draw people out of that culture to embrace Jesus Christ. Remember the old saying, "only dead fish go with the flow."
- Ten-days of "*Paul's Response to the Roman World*" contextual immersion experience was very special. As I end this Reflection, I realize how inadequate it is to capture its essence with words. Yet at the

same time, I hope these thoughts provide a small taste of what it was like to be immersed in this missing piece of biblical context, and why we are excited to be able to add contextual trips to Italy (next one is in early this October) along with Israel as part of our contextual offerings.

Thanks to the unique ambience of Italy, this trip felt like a wonderful study program fused together with a great vacation! It was a very special time because context ALWAYS matters! So if you would like to rejuvenate your reading, studying and understanding of Paul writings, better relating them to our present day, join us on a future trip.

**Shalom** Doug Greenwold PBT Teaching Fellow © Doug Greenwold 2014

**Mailing List** If this “Reflection” has been forwarded to you and you would like to receive future “Reflections,” you can subscribe on the PBT website [www.preservingbibletimes.org](http://www.preservingbibletimes.org) to receive them.

### Notes and Sources

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<sup>1</sup> Taking a phrase from Francis Schaffer.

<sup>2</sup> Much of this section is an abridged version from the material found on page 9 (the “Forward” section) of our *“An Italian Adventure: “Paul’s Response to the Roman World” Study Notebook.*

<sup>3</sup> Much of this section is an abridged version from the material found on page 122 (the “Great Transformation” section) of our *“An Italian Adventure: “Paul’s Response to the Roman World” Study Notebook.*