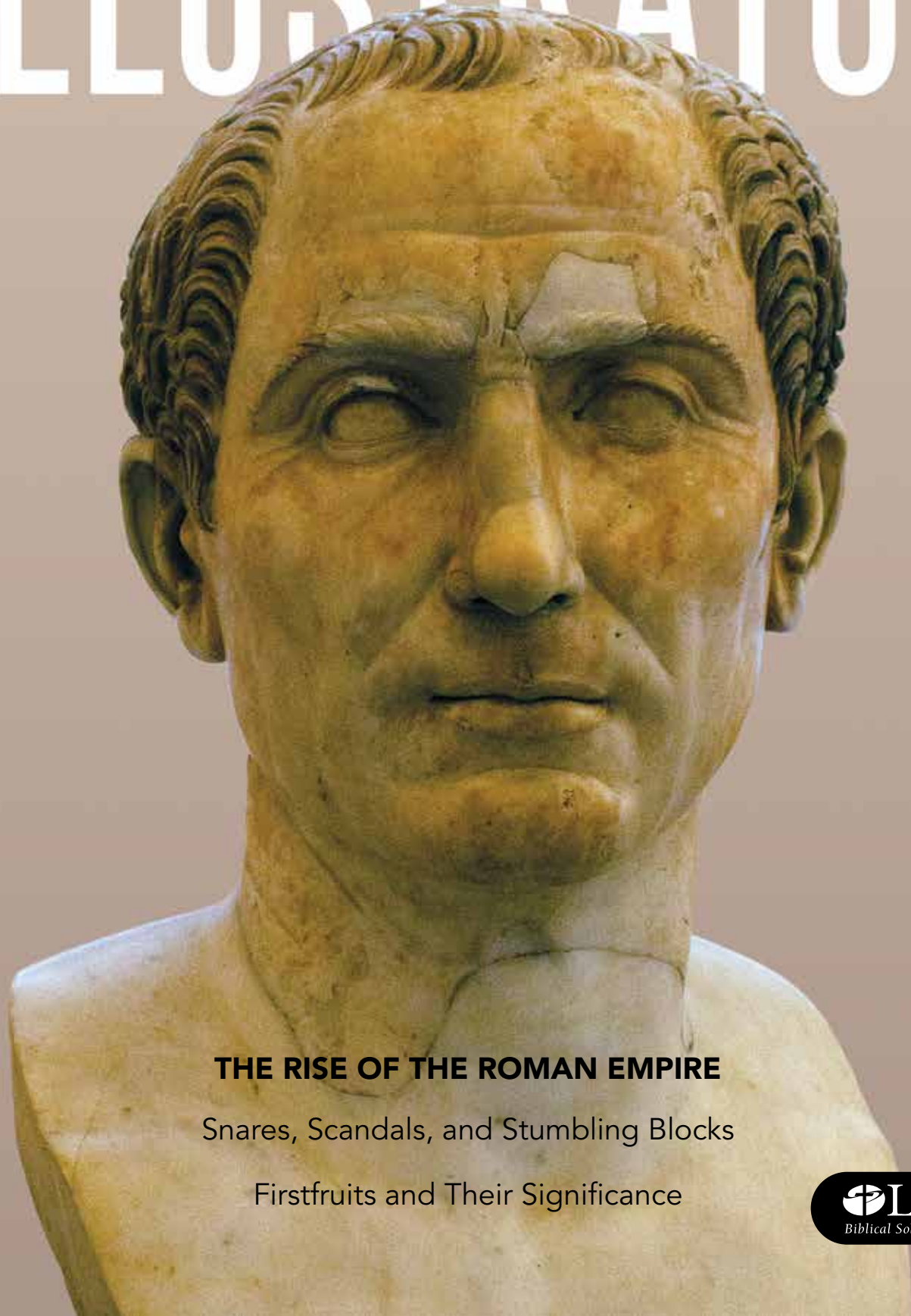


ILLUSTRATOR



THE RISE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Snares, Scandals, and Stumbling Blocks

Firstfruits and Their Significance

MY FRIEND DAVID recently asked: “Was Jesus a Roman citizen?” I had never considered this question before. With the rise of the Roman Empire and its controlling the entire region of Israel during Jesus’ lifetime, wouldn’t He have been a citizen of Rome?



We certainly know Jesus’ life was influenced by Rome; this began even before His birth. “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole empire should be registered” (Luke 2:1, CSB). This was the Caesar who helped transition Rome from a republic to an empire and served as its first emperor until his death in AD 14. Registering the citizenry aided Rome in collecting taxes and determining military service eligibility.

Even this information brings up a background question: How did Rome come to rule over this region? It actually began decades earlier when Rome’s General Pompey came to Jerusalem to put an end to a civil war that raged as two brothers battled for control of the region, Hyrcanus II and Aristobulus. Hyrcanus was the rightful heir. Each brother appealed to Pompey for help. Pompey sided with Hyrcanus. Assisted by Herod the Great’s father (Antipater of Idumea), Pompey besieged and conquered Jerusalem. Afterwards he named the victorious Hyrcanus as High Priest in Jerusalem. Additionally, he granted the Jews self-rule and placed them under the authority of the High Priest.

In time, Julius Caesar confirmed Hyrcanus as the Jewish High Priest and appointed Antipater as governor over Judea. The governor ruled over the region, but the Jews remained under the leadership of the High Priest. This was the situation at the time of Jesus’ birth. So although the region was part of the Roman Empire, the Jews maintained their autonomy. They were under Roman rule, but were considered separate.

So the short answer to David’s question is, “No. Jesus would not have been considered a Roman citizen. He would have been, however, a subject of Rome.”

In this issue of *Biblical Illustrator*, you are going to read a lot about Rome and the Roman Empire and about being Jewish in the first century. You will read about the early believers practicing their faith and the foundations for their practices. As you read, may your understanding of that world increase and may YOUR faith be deepened.

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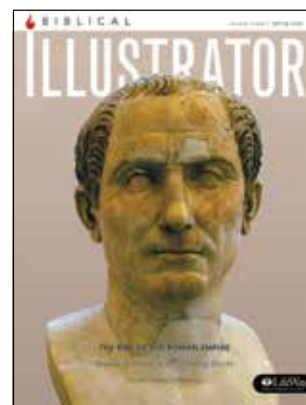
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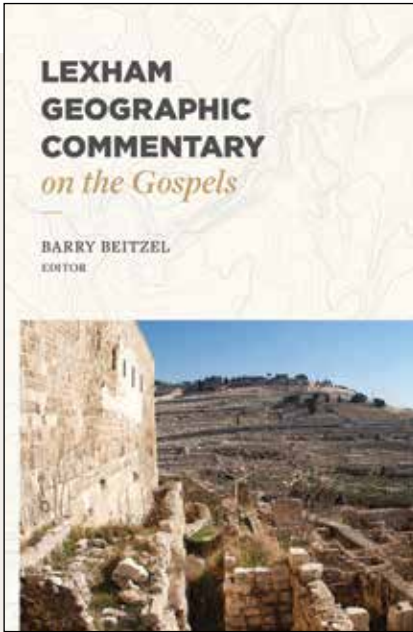
Printed in the United States of America

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About the Cover:
Bust of Julius Caesar, who lived ca. 100–44 BC. He served as a military general and a political leader; he helped transition Rome from a republic to an empire. His influence continues—the month of July is named after him.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ NAPLES ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM/ NAPLES, ITALY (173/B/2038)



BARRY J. BEITZEL HAS enlisted fourteen scholars, each of whom has at least one degree in “Middle Eastern geography, historical-geography, human geography, archaeology, and/or biblical studies” (p. xv). In forty-eight chapters, they explore events in the life of Christ roughly in chronological order—beginning with His birthplace and ending with His post-resurrection appearances. The emphasis in each chapter is not who, what, or why—but “where” these events occurred. What was the history and significance of where events and encounters took place, be they miracles, teaching, or just experiencing daily life?

experts in their areas of study. The photographs, maps, diagrams, and footnotes are helpful. The indices of Scripture and extra-biblical writings at the back are also useful. Consistently the contributors affirm the accuracy and reliability of biblical events and accounts, and explain the less-conservative interpretations as well.

A couple of concerns arose. First, the chapters are not consistent in always offering both the metric and imperial measurements. Second, at times the contributors do not reach the same conclusion, and for some readers that might be unsettling.

Having said that, the book is a treasure of up-to-date information, explanations, and discoveries. The writers will add to your knowledge and may even cause you to reinterpret what you thought you knew. Be forewarned, this book is not a quick read. There are many pages, and the font is small. What will slow you down the most, though, is the time you will take to pen countless notes in the margins of your favorite study Bible. 📖

The writers explore an impressively wide range of topics: geography; geology; history; archaeology; agriculture; weather and climate; Hebrew feasts, festivals, and traditions; first-century culture; the Roman Empire; biblical and Semitic languages; ancient architecture; and more. These become lenses through which the writers view individual occurrences in Jesus’ life.

The strengths of the book are many. The contributors are each

G.B. Howell, Jr. is the content editor of *Biblical Illustrator* magazine.

On a scale of 1-10, this book receives a rating of 10 camels.



Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels; Barry J. Beitzel, ed.; Lexham Press; 2016; 583 pages; hardback; ISBN 978-1-68359-0446

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SNARES SCANDALS AND STUMBLING BLOCKS

STOCK PHOTO

Right: Part of the relief that decorated the walls of Assyria's North Palace at Nineveh. A herd of deer, hunted from the left, discover that a net has been stretched across their escape route. One stag has been hit with arrows; 2 hunters hold the net; dated about 645-635 BC.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/9879)

BY PAUL N. JACKSON

SHORTLY AFTER SEMINARY graduation in 1983, I served the Sweet Home Baptist Church in Rule, Texas. As a hobby, I also tended a large garden plot next to the church. Egbert Smith, my elderly neighbor, allowed me to use his tractor and well water to prepare and manage the garden. Excitedly, I grew everything I could—corn, strawberries, okra, peppers, radishes, and sweet potatoes. I received great coaching from my members as I knew nothing about gardening. As soon as I started seeing growth, however, it happened. An unbelievable scandal!! One morning, I stood in shock, seeing a half-dozen dirt volcanoes protruding from the ground. Moles had mercilessly launched a full-scale attack. Egbert laughed as he handed me a homemade mole trap that I used to mount a counter attack. Every evening, I slid the trap into one of the tunnels those sneaky fiends had burrowed. Most mornings I happily discovered another trapped mole. I took great pleasure in hanging the dearly departed on a fence facing the garden as an ominous warning to all other moles. Then, a deacon told me that moles are blind. Scandal *and* insult!

Scandal

We derive our English word “scandal” from the Greek word

translated “stumbling block” in the New Testament.¹ Unfortunately, history is filled with examples and today is no exception. Scandals take down athletes, celebrities, political powers, and religious leaders. These failures carry rippling effects on families, friends, and associates. Scandals can be self-inflicted or sprung on others. What does the New Testament say about “scandals”?

In the Flesh

One of the earliest usages of the Greek term *skandalon* outside the New Testament refers to the “trapspring” in a snare employed to snag animals.² This is what the moles encountered in my garden. Although the New Testament contains no references to hunting, the idea of causing oneself or another to be *ensnared* is present.³ Targeting Peter for rebuking His first death pronouncement, Jesus equated him with Satan! “Get away from me, Satan! You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s” (Mark 8:33, NLT). By suggesting that Jesus’s death should be avoided, Peter’s rebuke functioned as a verbal “offense,” “hindrance,” or “stumbling block.”⁴

Matthew 18:6-9 records Jesus employing a combination of three verb forms and one noun form of the word. Jesus pronounced a woe



CREATIVE COMMONS LICENSE/ THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM/ BALTIMORE

Above: Terra-cotta figurine with traces of paint, pedagogue and student, dated 3rd-2nd centuries BC; about 6 in. tall. In Hellenistic culture, a pedagogue was

an adult male who was responsible for the moral and social education of a young boy. Proper teaching can help a child learn to avoid offenses that lead to downfall.

both on the world because of the inevitability of coming “offenses” and upon the person through whom the “offense” comes (v. 7).⁵ The verbs are translated as *fall away*, something that can be avoided by not leading children astray, or by radical surgery on offending hands,

feet, or eyes.⁶ Stumbling blocks can have severe consequences.

While Peter and the other disciples totally misunderstood the prevailing death-talk, Jesus revealed that all of His disciples would “fall away” (Greek, *skandalizo*) because of the pressure of the circumstances (Mark 14:27-31, NASB). While Peter strongly denied he would *skandalizo*, Jesus sadly, yet correctly, predicted that his most glaring *scandal* would come in the form of a triple denial.

In the Spirit

Indicating an amazing transformation, a downcast Simon Peter developed spiritually after Jesus restored him with a key post-resurrection conversation (John 21:1-19). Reflecting on Jesus and quoting Isaiah, Peter proclaimed that the *living stone* that became the *cornerstone* that the builders rejected, will prove to be a *stumbling stone* and a *tripping rock* (*skandalon*; Isa. 8:14; 1 Pet. 2:8).⁷

Peter and Isaiah addressed the same problem—that which hampers faithful allegiance to God and the resultant destructive consequences. And destructive it had been! Having been unfaithful to God, eventually both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms fell to their enemies in 722 and 586 BC respectively. One might say they *stumbled* into captivity. While *skandalon*

does not appear in the Greek translation of the Isaiah text, Peter added a line that includes it as a warning to avoid his own past failure.⁸

*A stone that causes men to stumble,
and a rock that trips [skandalon].*

—1 Peter 2:8, HCSB

In Rome and Corinth

While Paul used the term in similar ways as discussed above (see Rom. 9:33; Gal. 5:11), 1 Corinthians 8, 10, and Romans 14 highlight the sin of abusing our Christian freedom regarding what we eat and drink. Paul concluded with

a powerful declaration, “Therefore, if food causes my brother or sister to fall (*skandalizo*), I will never again eat meat!” (1 Cor. 8:13). Then, he critiqued the Corinthian slogan, “Everything is permissible!” (10:23-33). Correcting that misunderstanding, Paul told the Christians in Corinth that not everything is “helpful” or “edifying.”

Below: Part of the stones that formed the foundation underneath the Western Wall at Jerusalem’s Temple Mount. The large stone, which is partially

visible, measures about 44 feet long, 10 feet high, and almost 11 feet deep. Known as the Western Stone, it probably weighs about 570 tons.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (60/0568)



Working like a funnel, the row of rocks on the left and the posts on the right indicate where low stone walls were that men used to drive migrating gazelles, which they trapped for capture. The walls were known

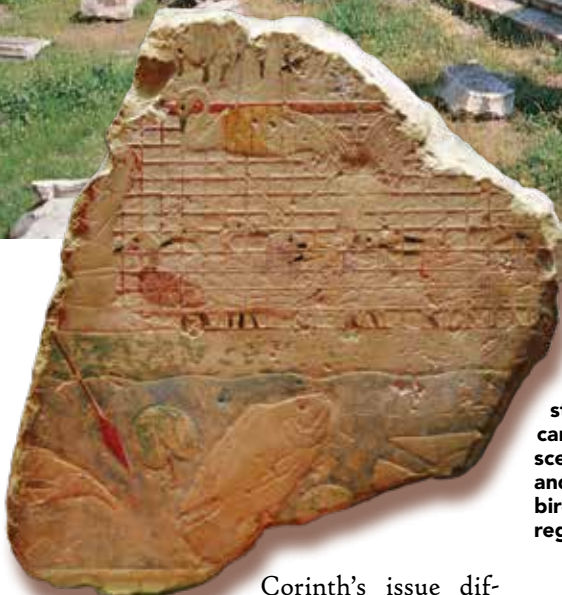
as “desert kites.” Although the practice goes back at least 6,000 years, it became widespread in the region in the 4th–2nd millennium BC. This desert kite is located at Samar in the Arava Valley of southern Israel.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (42/0324)



The marketplace at the Imperial Forum in Rome.

The Priority of Preaching



Left: Dated to Egypt's 12th Dynasty (1963–1786 BC), this limestone relief depicts a scene of fishing and of hunting birds. The upper registry shows

captured birds; the lower registry, fish, one of which has escaped the fisherman's harpoon. The relief decorated the tomb of a prominent family of Qaou el-Kebir, Egypt.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (20/14/16)

Corinth's issue differed from a similar issue in Rome. The Corinthians were questioning whether or not to eat meat offered to idols. In Rome, some believers criticized others for eating meat and drinking wine, thereby causing another to stumble.⁹ To address the issue Paul pointed out that two laws were at work, especially when Jews and Gentiles were trying to coexist in the same fellowship; the law of liberty and the law of love.

While the situations in Corinth and Rome differ slightly, John R. W. Stott correctly states the essential principle to draw from both:

There is a similar need for discernment today. We must not elevate non-essentials,

especially issues of custom and ceremony, to the level of the essential and make them tests of orthodoxy and conditions of fellowship. Nor must we marginalize fundamental theological or moral questions as if they were only cultural and of no great importance. Paul distinguished between these things; so should we.¹⁰

If we follow Paul's instructions to love each other and to pursue peace and what is edifying, we can then most successfully and consistently avoid setting traps for others or falling into them ourselves. And finally, with respect to every example considered, self-centeredness is the chief *scandal* at work. ♣

1. The Greek noun is *skandalon* (σκάνδαλον) and the Greek verb form is *skandalizo* (σκανδαλίζω). The English spelling is mostly letter-for-letter and thus easy to recognize and pronounce.
2. See Bill Mounce's freely accessible Greek-English dictionary at teknia.com. This word's occurrences and definitions can be found at www.billmounce.com/greek-dictionary/skandalon. See H. Liddell, R. Scott, and H. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 1064, and J. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 576, for references using this word connected to hunting prey.
3. See Rom. 9:33; 11:9; and 1 Pet. 2:8. *Skandalon* occurs 15 times, while *skandalizo* (verbal form) occurs 29 times in the New Testament.
4. Matt. 16:23, HCSB, ESV, and NASB.
5. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture translations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
6. Intended symbolically, but still means that we need to deal seriously with the things that can cause our *skandalon*. See also the parallel passage in Mark 9:42-50 where the verbal form of the word occurs four times.
7. Isaiah 8:12-17, Septuagint.
8. Karen Jobes agrees in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 150. "Ironically, Peter himself (the rock) was accused by Jesus of being a *skandalon* when Peter rebuked Jesus and attempted to deflect him from his predicted road to rejection and death (Matt. 16:23). Peter had become an occasion for Jesus to sin, a temptation that Jesus vigorously overcame by his sharp rebuke of Peter's thought. Here in 1 Pet. 2:8 Peter claims that Christ the cornerstone presents an opportunity either for trust or for rejection."
9. Rom. 14:13, 21.
10. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 358.

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ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (15/23/16)



ETB: Romans 10:5-15

The Priority *of* PREACHING

By Steve W. Lemke



ISTOCK PHOTO



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/40/94)

Left: At Philippi, steps leading up to the bishop's stand at Basilica A. The steps would have

lead to a raised circular pulpit from which the bishop would address the congrega-

tion. Built with the traditional 3 aisles, the church was constructed at the end of the 5th cent.

WHY DOES THE BIBLE SAY preaching is so important? The apostle Paul answers this question quite clearly in Romans 10:5-15. Preaching plays a crucial role in God's plan for bringing sinners to repentance and salvation.

The word translated, "proclaim" or "preach" in Romans 10:8 is based on the Greek word *kerysso*, used over fifty times in the New Testament. Writers of the New Testament used other words to describe various aspects of preaching, but *kerysso* is among the most prominent terms they used. Three important interrelated concepts flow from this word *kerysso*. First, a preacher or herald plays the role of a *keryx*, similar to a town crier who brings significant news. The preacher serves as an agent of someone in higher authority, communicating important news to the people of an area. Second, the activity of the herald is *kerysso*, to proclaim a significant message. For example, one usage of this word was to herald good news such as the victory of a king returning from battle. Likewise, the Christian preacher proclaims the victory King Jesus won over sin and death. Indeed, Jesus commissioned His disciples to preach the good news of the coming kingdom of God (Mark 3:14; Luke 9:1-2). Third, the preacher's primary message is the *kerygma*. For Christians, the *kerygma* is the gospel—the good news of Jesus' sinless life, atoning crucifixion, death, and victorious resurrection and ascension. If the *keryx* does not proclaim the *kerygma*, the herald has gone "off message."

Paul described this gospel message as both believing that God resurrected Jesus and confessing Jesus Christ as Lord (vv. 9-10). He likewise told the Corinthian church that "we preach Christ crucified"¹ (1 Cor. 1:23; see 2:2). The apostle elaborated this gospel message in greater detail in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8—Jesus was crucified for our sins, buried, resurrected on the third day, and appeared in His resurrected body to many people in multiple settings, including Paul



Right: A raised pulpit known as an ambo; this was used in the Byzantine church of St. Theodoros at Beit Sila, which was on the road between Lydda and Jerusalem. The church was in use from the 5th until the 7th centuries.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ GOOD SAMARITAN NW (129/8/0465)

himself. These events were foretold in the Old Testament Scriptures. In one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, He commanded that the message should be proclaimed to all nations concerning His crucifixion, death, and resurrection, to which the proper response was repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:44-49). Preachers in the New Testament focused their message on the *kerygma* of Jesus Christ.² All preaching should be gospel-focused on the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Paul's main point in Romans 9-11 is that righteousness and salvation come not by our good works, but by the righteousness we have through faith in Jesus Christ. Attaining righteousness by good works would be as impossible as climbing up to heaven (Rom. 10:5-6; see Deut. 30:12-13). True salvation comes only by placing one's faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 10:9-10).



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/GB HOWELL (35/33/79)

Above: Mars Hill is an outcropping of stone that overlooks the forum at Athens. Philosophers gathered here to debate and discuss ideas and schools of thought. Brought here by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers, Paul declared the gospel of Christ; some believed, and others rejected his message and ridiculed him.

Right: Egyptian figure of a royal herald named

Neni; wooden; dated to about 2250 BC. In Egyptian culture, the royal herald was responsible for assisting with palace administration and for maintaining palace protocol and etiquette. Additionally, he would oversee the formal ceremonies of the Egyptian court and palace and also serve as the royal reporter or royal "repeater" of news that the pharaoh either received or announced.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRUCE/ ORIENTAL MUSEUM OF CHICAGO (70/9272)



Paul affirmed that the great value of gospel-centered preaching is that whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (v. 11-15). "Whoever" means that everyone is potentially savable. Preaching should therefore be addressed to everyone who will hear the gospel. For people to be saved, however, they must first hear the "message of faith" preached (v. 8). The hearers cannot call upon Him in whom they have not believed; they cannot believe unless they hear the gospel preached; and they cannot hear without a preacher being sent to share the gospel with them (vv. 14-15).

Preaching or proclamation is more than a mere announcement of good news. The Greeks used the word *kerysso* to imply making an appeal for a decision. They used this word for trying to persuade someone to purchase a property or to encourage persons to agree to become colonists. Romans 10:14 uses *kerysso* in this sense—sharing the gospel with a view to persuading or convincing the hearers.

Appealing to and exhorting hearers to respond is a crucial element of biblical preaching. The description of Peter's sermon at Pentecost states that he "strongly urged" his hearers to respond to the gospel and be saved, which many of them did (Acts 2:40-41). Likewise, in describing his own preaching, the apostle Paul said, "we try to persuade people" (2 Cor. 5:11). The contemporary master preacher John Stott made a similar point:

It is not enough to expound a thoroughly orthodox doctrine of reconciliation if we never beg people to come to Christ. Nor is it right for a sermon to consist of an interminable appeal that has not been preceded by an exposition of the gospel. The rule should be "no appeal without a proclamation, and no proclamation without an appeal."³

The best preaching does not draw attention to the speaker's oratorical skills. Paul insisted to the Corinthian church that he did not preach to them with cleverness of words or brilliance of speech (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1). Instead, the apostle preached the simple gospel message of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1:23; 2:2). The message of God may be enhanced with effective speaking skills, but not if the oratory overwhelms the message. The sermon should bring attention to the message, not the messenger. The message of the gospel must always be the focus of Christ-centered preaching.

Most pastors both preach and teach. Indeed, Paul told Timothy that a pastor should be an "able teacher" (1 Tim. 3:2, HCSB). What is the distinction between preaching and teaching? These two important functions of a Christian minister overlap somewhat, but the two also differ in at least four ways at times. First, sometimes the *location* will be different. Teaching is usually done in the synagogue, church, someone's home, or a gathering place within the community (Acts 17:2; 19:9; 20:20; 1 Cor. 4:17). Preaching is also done in church, of course, but can be also in more public places like streets or public buildings. Peter's sermon at Pentecost was in the streets of Jerusalem (Acts 2:5-41), and Paul's sermon on Mars Hill was outside on the Areopagus of Rome (17:16-34). The second difference is the *audience*. Teaching is intended primarily for people who have already been exposed to the gospel message; preaching is intended primarily for unbelieving sinners. The third difference concerns the *content* of the message. Teaching involves sharing information such as an exposition of Scripture, explaining a key doctrine or belief. The primary content of preaching is the gospel of Christ. Fourth, the *purpose* of teaching is to edify and inform believers and those who have already

Below: Located between the colosseum and Palatine Hill in Rome, the Triumphal Arch honors Constantine's victory over the Roman tyrant Maxentius at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in AD 312. Standing about 69 feet tall, 84 feet wide, and 23 feet deep, both sides of the structure highlight Constantine's political, military, and personal accomplishments.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (35/60/27)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (82/8/0550)

Above: In the center-right of the photo are the southern steps, which were part of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem. Rabbis

regularly instructed their students in this area before leading them through the doors (which have been sealed) to the tem-

ple platform. Some have surmised that Peter preached his Pentecost sermon to those gathered at the southern steps.

heard the gospel, to increase their knowledge of God. The purpose of preaching is to share the gospel with unbelievers, to which the appropriate response is repentance and faith.

Both preaching and teaching should be based on the written Word of God, not on our own ideas. Romans 9–11 contains many references to Old Testament Scriptures. For example, 10:5–10 echoes the language of Deuteronomy 30:12–14; and Paul alluded to Leviticus 18:5 in 10:5. Later, verse 13 clearly references Joel 2:32. Bible-based preaching or teaching gives the message greater authority because of the divine inspiration of Scripture. Since Scripture consistently affirms Jesus as our Savior, biblical preaching is always Christ-centered.

When preachers proclaim the Word of God faithfully, the result is life transformation. The power of preaching is not in the preacher's words, but in the Spirit of God driving those words home in the hearts of hearers. True proclamation involves heralding important, life-changing news.

Each generation has at least one event that is always cemented in their minds. We can all remember exactly where we were and how we felt when we first heard of tragic events like the attack on Pearl Harbor, the President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, the Challenger explosion, or the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Or we may remember good news such as our favorite sports team winning, our candidate winning an important election, or getting good news from a doctor. Even news at this level of significance changes our lives. We become different after we hear that news. It spurs our emotions and causes us to want to respond in various ways. So is the effective preaching of the gospel. Spirit-empowered gospel preaching ignites like a stick of dynamite in the hearers' souls, changing their lives forever. Gospel preaching sounds strange to unbelievers (1 Cor. 1:18,20–21,23); but it brings light and life to those who hear and believe (Rom. 10:8–10; 2 Cor. 4:6). 🔥

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. Acts 2:12–41; 3:12–20; 4:10–12,31; 5:42; 6:4,7; 7:51–52; 10:34–43; 11:36–43; 13:23–39; 17:2–4,10–13,22–24; Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:17,23–24; 1 Tim. 2:7.

3. John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 198.

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CAESAR AUGUSTUS



ILLUSTRATION PHOTO: BRENT BRUCE (9/18/1599)

BY GERALD L. STEVENS

FROM POLITICS TO administration to architecture, Augustus set the foundation for the Roman remains we see as tourists overseas about twenty centuries later. He boasted that he found Rome made of brick and left the city of marble.¹

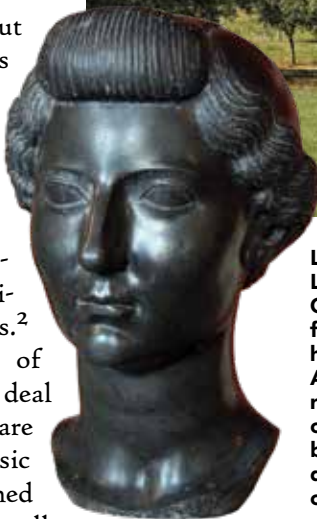
Family Background

How little we know about Augustus's paternal family is surprising for one of the greatest figures of Western civilization. Roman historians do not offer much. For instance, Tacitus, about AD 100-110, mentions only briefly circumstances surrounding the AD 14 transition from Augustus to Tiberius.² Livy was a contemporary of Augustus, but his books that deal with the rise of Augustus are lost. Suetonius, our only basic source for Augustus, complained that two short paragraphs was all he could muster on the paternal ancestry of Augustus, first known as the boy Thurinus, then the general Octavian, but finally as the emperor Augustus.³

What we do learn from Suetonius is that Augustus's family background in the small town of Velitrae (Velletri) about twenty-five miles from Rome was plebeian, humble, and lower class. Locally in Velletri, the Octavii family was honored because Augustus's father provided military leadership in successful skirmishes with a nearby town. Even so, these humble origins gave Augustus's enemies room to taunt him. For example, Mark Antony accused Octavian's great-grandfather of being only a countryside freedman and rope-maker and his grandfather a low-class

ISTOCK PHOTO

Augustus's family was from Velitrae, a small village about 25 miles from Rome.



Left: The Empress Livia, wife of Caesar Augustus from 38 BC until her death in AD 29. The bust reflects the neoclassic style that became prominent during the reign of Augustus.

FAST FACT:

Historians refer to Caesar Augustus as Octavian in order to distinguish him from Julius Caesar.

money changer.⁴ Thus, one of the ironies of the famous Augustus is how he was a poster child for small-town boy makes big.

Gaius Octavius Thurinus was born to Octavius and Atia on September 23 at the Ox-Heads in the Palatine quarter in Rome in 63 BC. Atia's own mother was Julia, the sister of Gaius Julius Caesar. So, Julius Caesar was Augustus's great uncle. After his birth in the city, Augustus's family apparently returned to the homestead in Velletri.⁵ His father died when Augustus was only four. While his mother remarried, his new stepfather showed little interest in the young Augustus. For eight years his grandmother raised him until she died around 51 BC; Augustus delivered the funeral oration at age

twelve. Augustus later endeared himself to his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, gaining his deep respect by enduring great hazards including being shipwrecked when joining up with Caesar's African campaign.⁶ The Octavii family fortunes had shifted over the years between patrician and plebeian social status until Caesar solidified the patrician rank permanently.⁷

General Attitudes

A humble family background explains Augustus's general attitudes and approach to life. He was self-conscious of his social status, so generally he was neither self-assuming nor presumptive.⁸ His enemies, such as Antony and Cassius, used these humble origins to slander him with dishonorable accusations. Augustus naturally honored traditions and respected social conventions. For example,

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM (55776)

religiously, Augustus respected foreign rites that were ancient and well established. At the same time, he commended his grandson Gaius for not offering prayers at Jerusalem on an occasion when Gaius was passing through the region.⁹ He held conservative views on morality and social issues.¹⁰ These attitudes later facilitated his working with patrician families in the senate whose status was tied to the traditions of the old Roman Republic. Augustus appealed to these old values, which satisfied Rome's well-established families as he was reconstructing the imploding Roman world. Augustus smartly refused monarchical titles while still functioning as a military dictator. He wisely deflected political suspicion by

referring to himself not as a monarch but as the *princeps civitatis*, or "first citizen" of the state. The form of government that emerged around this fictitious persona was called the Roman Principate.

Political Fortunes

Julius Caesar (100–44 BC) had named his grandnephew his adoptive son and heir in his will, so

Augustus's adoptive name became Gaius Julius Caesar according to Roman custom. For this historical period, to prevent obvious name confusion, historians refer to Augustus as Octavian to distinguish him from Julius Caesar, even though Augustus himself never used the name Octavian.

Avenging the Ides of March murder of his great uncle set Octavian

Right: Altar in the Temple of Augustus in Pompeii. The scene likely depicts part of the celebratory sacrifices that were offered on the day the temple was dedicated to the deified Augustus.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (20/1/2)

Partial ruins of the Forum of Augustus in Rome. This, the "Hall of Colossus," housed a statue of Augustus, which stood over 35 feet tall.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (12/1/6/1577)

on his military and political career that eventually transformed not only Rome but also the world. Octavian had a long and treacherous road to travel to secure his rule in the political turmoil that ensued. In so doing, he negotiated and fought his way eventually to becoming sole ruler of the Roman world after defeating Antony in the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. Because he resolved two centuries of catastrophic Roman civil war and then from those ruins raised the foundation of the Roman Empire, he was acclaimed as the Father of his country and given the name Augustus.¹¹ The senate in 13 BC commissioned the *Ara Pacis Augustae*, “Altar of Augustan Peace,” to commemorate Augustus’s subjugation of Spain and Gaul.¹² The relative peace, stability, and prosperity that ensued for the Mediterranean world became known as the *Pax Romana*, the “Roman Peace,” of which Augustus bragged in his last will and testament.¹³

Family Fortunes

While Caesar Augustus’s political and military accomplishments were astounding, his personal life was not. He had conservative values, but was not without vices. He was a known adulterer. Suetonius admits that not even Augustus’s friends would deny this reality, and the behavior continued into old age.¹⁴ He had a penchant for gaming as well, especially throwing dice after dinner.¹⁵ These vices, however, in the context of ancient Roman society were considered rather mild. Otherwise, Augustus had a temperate reputation, especially showing no desire for lavish displays of wealth or luxury, including in his own personal residences.¹⁶

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (19/14/19)



Above: Ruins of the residence of Augustus on Palatine Hill in Rome.

Below: Bust of Julia, the daughter of Augustus and Scribonia.



Above: Dedicatory inscription honoring Julia, daughter of Augustus. The text describes Julia as a goddess, mother of many children, and the daughter of the god Caesar Augustus; dated about 15-12 BC.

Augustus’s marriage life was unsettled, and his progeny did little better. He first rejected a prearranged family betrothal in order to marry Antony’s stepdaughter Claudia for political purposes after the Battle of Philippi. That diplomatic arrangement, however, fell apart immediately in divorce before even the union was consummated

due to intractable problems presented by Claudia’s fuming mother, Fulvia. Augustus then married for reasons unknown a double divorcee of two ex-consuls; her name was Scribonia. Together they had one daughter Julia, Augustus’s only progeny, named for Augustus’s maternal grandmother (sister of Julius Caesar). Unfortunately, this marriage also collapsed because of what Augustus himself styled as Scribonia’s “shrewish disposition.”¹⁷ Augustus immediately then took Livia Drusilla as wife, who at the time was still married to Tiberius Nero and was with child by him. The son she bore was named Tiberius (after his father). Though Augustus thereafter remained married to Livia to the end of his life, the union produced no offspring.

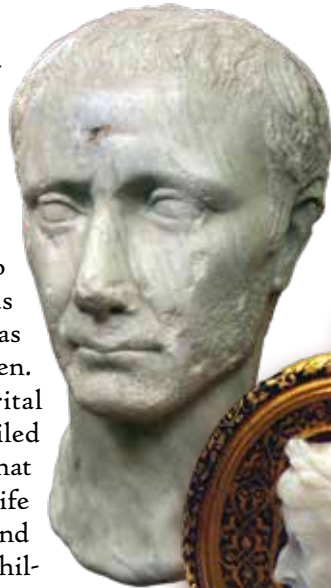
Augustus's only daughter, Julia, first was given in marriage to his nephew, Marcellus, son of his sister, Octavia. Marcellus, however, died an untimely death. Octavia also had a son-in-law, Marcus Agrippa, who already was married and had children. Despite Agrippa's marital status, Augustus prevailed upon his sister Octavia that Agrippa divorce his first wife to marry Julia. Agrippa and Julia produced five grandchildren for Augustus: two granddaughters, Julia (after her mother), and Agrippina, and three grandsons, Gaius, Lucius, and Agrippa (after his father). Regrettably, Julia's second husband Agrippa also died an untimely death. Augustus had trouble by this time settling on a third husband for Julia until he finally decided that his stepson, Tiberius, should marry her, even though Tiberius himself by this time already was married, had one child, and another on the way. Thus, as he had with the second husband, Agrippa, Augustus also forced the third husband Tiberius to divorce his first wife in order to marry Julia. Tiberius and Julia, however, had no children.

The family tale related to these grandchildren from Julia and Agrippa was an unhappy one. Both Augustus's own daughter Julia and his granddaughter Julia were guilty of such vice that Augustus was forced to banish them. Grandsons Gaius and Lucius tragically died within eighteen months of each other. Augustus at this time adopted the remaining grandson, Agrippa, as well as his stepson (and son-in-law) Tiberius. Unfortunately, Augustus had to banish his last grandson, Agrippa, due to social

impropriety and poor character.¹⁸ He then was left with one remaining granddaughter, Agrippina, and one adoptive stepson, Tiberius, who eventually became the second emperor of Rome when Augustus died on August 19 in the year AD 14.¹⁹

Luke's Context

Luke carefully documented that Jesus was born in the context of the rule of this Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1). He also emphasized Jesus' gospel brought a message of peace on earth (v. 14). Why? Luke thereby set in stark contrast two gospels, two claims to establishing a kingdom and bringing good news of peace on earth. One was the imperial claim of the kingdom of Augustus. The other was the angelic proclamation of the kingdom of Jesus. Here we have counteroffers of a kingdom, of peace on earth, and of how to live in that kingdom. Once you thoroughly know both stories, though, the question of which kingdom is worth your life and allegiance disappears. That was then. This is now. What



Left: Marble bust depicting Julius Caesar.



Below: Cameo portraying Emperor Tiberius, who ruled AD 14-37. He is depicted wearing a laurel wreath crown, a symbol of victory.

FAST FACT:

The New Testament mentions three Roman Emperors: Caesar Augustus (Luke 2:1); Tiberius (Luke 3:1); and Claudius (Acts 18:2).

kingdom today, no matter how powerful and regardless of earthly promises of peace, security, and prosperity, has your allegiance? 🕯

1. Suetonius, *Augustus* 28.3.
2. Tacitus, *Annals* 1.1.
3. Suetonius, *Augustus* 2.3. Augustus actually had many names over the course of his lifetime. For the surname at birth of Thurinus, see Suetonius, *Augustus* 7.1. He later took the name Gaius Julius Caesar through the will of his great uncle, Gaius Julius Caesar.
4. Suetonius, *Augustus* 2.3. For other taunts by other political opponents, see *Augustus* 4.
5. The date and place are both confused. Some maintained the tradition that he actually was born in Velitrae (Velletri). Further, his birthday in ancient Roman calendars was given as September 23, but ancient authors referred to his birth sign as Capricorn, so confusion exists. The Roman calendar system, basically lunar, is notoriously complicated and required attempted reforms by Julius Caesar, and further adjustments centuries later by Gregory.
6. Suetonius, *Augustus* 8.1.
7. Suetonius, *Augustus* 2.1.
8. Suetonius, *Augustus* 51–57, details at length the evidence of Augustus's clemency and moderation with numerous examples regarding refusal of honorific temples, toleration in public discourse, and enduring lampoons in senatorial debate. Such conduct made Augustus beloved by many.
9. Suetonius, *Augustus* 93.
10. Such as forbidding beardless youths to participate in the Lupercalia running or disallowing any youth of either sex to attend nighttime entertainments except under the supervision of an adult relative; Suetonius, *Augustus* 31.4. His attempts to reform marriage and divorce conventions, however, received serious opposition; *Augustus* 34.1. "He desired also to revive the ancient fashion of dress"; *Augustus* 40.5.
11. Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 35; *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: The Achievements of the Divine Augustus*, with an introduction and commentary by P.A. Brunt and J.M. Moore (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967). Suetonius, *Augustus* 58.1. The proposal to call him Romulus as the second founder of Rome was eschewed due to negative Roman associations with kingship. The senate finally settled on the name Augustus, and that name became his legacy.
12. Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 12.
13. Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 13, 25–26.
14. Suetonius, *Augustus* 69.1. See the entire chapter for a rundown of specific rumors that surrounded Augustus on the matter. See also *Augustus* 71.1.
15. Suetonius, *Augustus* 71.1–2.
16. Suetonius, *Augustus* 72–73.
17. Suetonius, *Augustus* 62.2.
18. Suetonius, *Augustus* 64–65.
19. Suetonius, *Augustus* 100.1.

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