

Salt, Caesar, and *Revelation*. The unlikely duo of salt and Caesar Augustus helps increase understanding of my little book, *Revelation*. Salt or Caesar, which one first? Caesar Augustus! If I start with salt, I may get too hungry.

Caesar Augustus became the first emperor of Rome in 27 BC. He took over a huge empire that stretched from the Middle East to England. Augustus quickly consolidated all government authority under him. He was undeniably the center of power until he died in 14 AD.

During his 41 years of reign, Augustus established the Pax Romana, or the Roman Peace. There was peace throughout his empire, and at most of his borders. Any traveler could go on the fine Roman highways almost anywhere in the empire without fear of bandits or war. Throughout my entire lifetime, and for a hundred years thereafter, the Pax Romana was firmly established.

One of the main things the Roman government would *not* put up with was political unrest or rebellion in any of its conquered territories. If any disturbance arose, any politician or soldier in charge was soon relieved of his duties and replaced with one who did not allow such things to happen.

Rome kept the peace by letting the various populations of their conquered territories continue to worship their own local gods, follow local customs, and obey local politicians. Stay peaceful and pay taxes, and you could do almost anything else you wanted.

During my late adulthood, the population of the Roman Empire was about 60-70 million people, with over ten million of them being slaves. There were countless population groups who functioned independently...as long as they stayed peaceful and paid taxes. That was the usual case. However, when the politicians needed to take more money from a group or needed political scapegoats, any local population group could easily be chosen for persecution.

We're getting to the salt part, be patient. There were probably 60-70 million people in the Roman Empire during my late adulthood. How many Christians existed when I wrote *Revelation*? Nobody knows for sure, but if you guessed 100,000 or less, you would probably be much closer than if you guessed 1,000,000.<sup>1</sup> We were building a solid base, but the explosive growth of Christianity had not yet happened. *And the Christians that existed were scattered throughout the Empire.*

<sup>1</sup> *The Rise of Christianity* by Rodney Stark. Page 7

Modern historians possess huge numbers of Roman records. Yet, there are no Roman records mentioning the Christians as even existing, until after my lifetime.<sup>2</sup> We were a tiny, tiny part of the Empire's population, and we typically stayed peaceful. Except when our lifestyles caused us to come into conflict with local authorities.

Ok, now...salt. In your life, salt is so cheap that you get it for free at restaurants. It was not always that way. Salt was one of the first reasons people traded and traveled. Salt was incredibly precious because it could be used to preserve food, heal certain ailments, and as you know, make food taste better.

Salt is so effective for taste, that you can scatter a few tiny crystals on a bite of food and it tastes (he makes a yum sound). Scatter a few more, and it tastes (makes a YUM sound). Scatter a few more, and (makes a yuck sound) it gets a little too salty. A few more, and whoa, it's too salty to even eat. A little bit of salt goes a long, long way.

That is one reason that Jesus said for us to be the "salt of the earth,"<sup>3</sup> and Paul advised us to season our conversation with grace, as if it were salt.<sup>4</sup> They knew a little bit went a long way.

Even though there were not that many Christians existing in my lifetime, if they congregated in one place, they could be a little too salty for the tastes of the local politicians. Yes, the Christians stayed peaceful. But, they stayed to themselves and had odd religious rites. They worshiped some foreign God instead of the local gods. And, they made good targets if you wanted to take their stuff, or great scapegoats if you needed someone to blame.

There were not that many Christians in total, but the numbers were growing quickly, especially in some localities. So, Christians were going to be persecuted more and more, and anybody with brains knew it. Especially if you had brains **and** the Holy Spirit to tell you.

According to one historians after my lifetime, there was persecution of Christians by Nero after the big fire in Rome in 64 AD, but he was looking for anybody to blame. In my lifetime, Christians generally lived in peace with the Romans, except from torment by local leaders. That changed in 81 AD when Domitian became Emperor.

Domitian persecuted many Romans and many population groups.<sup>6</sup> Among the groups he persecuted were the Christians, including me. He caused my exile to the Greek Island of Patmos, not far from my home in Ephesus.

<sup>2</sup> *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, by Robert Louis Wilen, Introduction

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:13

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 4:6

<sup>5</sup> *Annals*, by Tacitus, Book 15, Chapter 44. Written about 116 AD.

<sup>6</sup> *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them*, by Robert Louis Wilken, page 5

If you ever have the misfortune to get exiled, I hope you get the same treatment I got. I was sent to one of the most beautiful islands on Earth. I climbed up the side of a mountain and found a small cave to live in. It protected me from the elements, and allowed me to gather fresh water from the rain. Best of all, I was away from people so I could pray and meditate while looking down at the gorgeous Aegean Sea. What better gig could an old man hope for?

To be very clear with you, I am the John who wrote the *Gospel of John*; *First, Second and Third John*; and, *Revelation*. I was one of the first apostles of Jesus, the brother of James, and the son of Zebedee. I was the one known as “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” I was the original Teacher’s Pet. At the time I wrote *Revelation*, I was past eighty years-old...a very old man for my time. I had been talking to Jesus every day for more than fifty years, with only three of those years talking in person. Usually I talked spiritually with him.

That is what I was doing one Sunday, just as the sun was coming up over the indigo blue Aegean Sea. What happened next was astounding. I received a direct revelation from Jesus Christ to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending it via an angel. My writing of this is known as *Revelation*, the last book in the Bible. I testify that everything I saw is the word of God and testimony of Jesus.

The book of *Revelation* is challenging for everybody to read. That is why I specifically said that people who read it aloud are blessed, as are those who hear it and take it to heart. I didn’t say you had to *understand* it to be blessed, just to read it aloud, hear it, and take it to heart. (smiling) I wrote the book and I *still* don’t understand all of it.

Let’s start with the basics. The revelation is a letter from God, the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ. The descriptions of Jesus are simply amazing: faithful witness, firstborn from the dead, ruler of the kings of earth, saving us by his blood, and making us to be his kingdom and priests. He calls himself the Alpha and Omega, or the beginning and the end. He is the one who is, who was, and who is to come. He is the Almighty!

We get an early glimpse of the future in one more line: “Pay attention, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him.”<sup>7</sup> These descriptions remind us of other places in the New Testament where we are told that Jesus is coming back.

Here is another basic that some people forget. This letter was specifically written to seven churches. These seven churches were in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Four of those churches and cities are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

<sup>7</sup> Revelation 1:7

Thyatira is mentioned as the hometown of Lydia, the seller of purple cloth that Paul converted in Philippi.<sup>8</sup> It is likely that her influence helped establish the church in Thyatira. Paul mentioned the church at Laodicea twice in his letter to the Colossians.<sup>9</sup>

The church at Ephesus was a major church in New Testament times. It was established by Aquila and Priscilla. Paul lived in Ephesus for three years and really helped grow the church. Timothy spent a lot of time there and probably was a church leader for many years. Some people believe that I lived in Ephesus for a long time, possibly with the mother of Jesus, although the Bible does not say that.

All of the seven churches were located in the Roman province of Asia, modern day Turkey. Ephesus was a major Roman city, and the other six churches were located to the north and east of Ephesus. It is probable that they were all established by Paul and his helpers during the missionary journeys and while Paul lived in Ephesus. If so, they had all existed two or three decades before *Revelation* was written. They must have been well-known and established churches.

The last basic piece of knowledge is how the letter was written. The Lord sent an angel to me, and I wrote down what I was told and what I saw. Sometimes the angel instructed me, and sometimes the Lord himself did. I was instructed to write about “the things that are, and the things which shall happen later.”<sup>10</sup> I was also to write about the mysteries of the seven stars and seven lampstands. The seven stars were the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands were the seven churches.

There is so much left to tell you – So let me save the rest - where you will hear more about the seven churches and their angels, two heavens, and one crazy future.

<sup>8</sup> Acts 16:14

<sup>9</sup> Colossians 2:1, 4:13

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 1:19