

Augustus

“Now it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth.” Luke 2:1

After the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B.C., Mark Antony (Caesar’s chief lieutenant), Octavian (Caesar’s 18 year old nephew), and Lepidus (governor of Spain), formed a triumvirate to avenge the death of Caesar and to continue his policies. They hunted down the leaders of the Senate, including Cicero. While he had no part in the killing of Caesar, the triumvirs feared his oratorical and literary brilliance and wanted him out of the way. Three hundred senators and 2,000 equestrians (middle class government officials and merchants) were condemned to death. Brutus and Cassius, the actual leaders of the plot to kill Caesar, fled east to raise an army and fight the triumvirs for control of Rome.

Antony and Octavian defeated the legions of Brutus and Cassius at Philippi, and the Empire was divided between Lepidus (Africa), Antony (the East), and Octavian (Italy and the West). There was the inevitable power struggle among the triumvirs, and Octavian defeated Lepidus in Africa and took over.

Octavian could not attack Mark Antony directly because Antony had been a close associate of Caesar. But Antony fell under the control of Cleopatra. Octavian was then able to declare that Antony had become Cleopatra’s puppet and that she was conspiring to overthrow the government of Rome for herself. The tactic worked. Rome and its Italian allies pledged support to Octavian, and Antony was defeated in the naval battle of Actium. Octavian was now master of the Mediterranean world.

Octavian was careful not to appear to be taking over. He resigned all his offices and returned the power of the state to the Senate and to the people of Rome. However, the Senate refused to allow Octavian to resign, instead naming him Augustus, a religious title indicating that its possessor has superhuman powers. As Augustus, Octavian commanded the Roman armies and navy, controlled public funds, and

ruled the Roman provinces. But Octavian never assumed the title of Emperor (*imperator* = dictator). He called himself Princeps, or “first citizen” of the state, an equal among equals. Augustus and his successors actually exercised the powers of emperors, but they technically did not claim the title. Hence, the Roman state was known as the Principate until about 284 A.D.

Augustus (Octavian) restructured Roman government; and until about 180 A.D., the basic pattern of government was his. He introduced the following reforms which had great influence on the development of the Christian church over the first three centuries A.D.:

1. All provinces were placed under the control of the Princeps, who appointed military governors.
2. All provinces were divided into municipalities. All municipal officers were elected by the freeborn citizens of the city, the community enjoying complete autonomy. Imperial officials did not interfere in local matters. Usually, the communities were dominated by their wealthier citizens.
3. Imperial officers appointed to govern the provinces were salaried by Rome. Tax collectors, in particular, were given an annual salary rather than a percentage of the taxes collected. This was done to prevent them from abusing their powers in order to fatten their pockets, and it helped make them more dependent on Rome.
4. Augustus began extensive road building programs and empire-wide postal service. This made for better trade and commerce and for better communications and imperial administration.
5. In order to strengthen his hold on the provinces, August had himself proclaimed a deity. He felt that foreign people would find it easier to obey the commands of a god than those of a conqueror. In Italy, he did not proclaim his divinity because he had a legal right to rule there anyway.

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6. Under Augustus, Roman law began to reach maturity. Eminent judges issued *responsa prudentium*, the “answer of the wise”, legal opinions on the issues brought before the judges. Gradually, these answers formed a body and philosophy of law and were accepted as precedent for the decision of similar cases. Roman law was based on statutes of the Senate, edicts of the Princeps, the “responsas”, and certain ancient customs which had the force of law. The statutes, edicts, and responsas formed the *ius civile*, the written law of the Empire.
 7. The old customs formed the *ius gentium*, the unwritten common law. Roman citizens had the right to appeal to the Princeps from the decisions of local courts, and they were immune from degrading corporal punishments. This raised the dignity of Roman citizenship and established the principle that all Roman citizens, irrespective of social class, were equal before the law.
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