

William Carey University
Hattiesburg, Mississippi, USA

Lecture on the Topic

**“Socio-Economic History of the First Christian
Century Greco-Roman World”**

Delivered on 19 November 2015
To HIS 1018—WORLD HISTORY TO 1500
By Dipankar Haldar¹

1. Introduction: The first Christian century was ruled by the Greco-Roman civilization. The Greco-Roman world in the first Christian century was very vast and scattered throughout the territories around the Mediterranean Sea. Its eastern boundary was the Euphrates River and western boundary was the Atlantic Ocean. It stretched from the river Danube in the north to the Sahara desert in the south. This vast region was under the rule of Rome. Its total population would be around 100 million at that time. The different people groups in this jurisdiction had imbibed the Greco-Roman cultures and practices in their daily lives. In this civilization, the political decisions were carried out by the Romans. The Greek had shown the path of cultural civilization. So, this unified empire was politically Roman, culturally Greek and socio-religiously pagan. From a wholistic point of view the influences of the Greeks were far stronger than the Romans. Although Rome had politically conquered the Greek empire, it did not want to destroy the Greek culture and life-style. It may be said that the Romans also absorbed the Greek culture, literature and philosophy. At that time, three different types of cultures were prevailing in that civilization, i.e. Judaism, Hellenism and Roman Imperialism.

2. Socio-Economic History: The first century saw the degradation in family and social life in the Roman civilization. Rome's former glory and fame had been diminishing gradually. In the socio-economic life, there were two sections of people. On the one hand the military and political leaders were very wealthy, and on the other, there were hundreds of thousands of poor people. There was no existence of middle class people who are very important in any ideal society. There was no one to condemn the slave trading system in that society. To prove aristocracy and honor in the society, any family would keep at least 10 bonded-slaves. Two hundred slaves were respectable for any wealthy and well-established family, although a few extraordinary rich people used to keep thousands of slaves. Hence, the slave trading market could be seen on the road-sides of Rome.

¹ Rev. Dr. Dipankar Haldar is Associate Professor at Serampore College (University), Faculty of Theology, since 2004. He began his pastoral ministry in 1990. He taught in Bishop's College, Kolkata during 1994-1998 and also served as the Chief Executive of Bible Society of India's Calcutta Auxiliary during 1998-2004, after which he was invited to teach in Serampore. He has written several books and articles. His educational qualifications are: B.A. (Eng. From Scottish Church College), B.D. (Serampore University), M.Th. (Serampore University), Doctor of Ministry (Serampore University), M.Phil (Pondicherry Central Govt. University), Dip. In Christian Communication (AICC-10, Thailand), (Ph.D. in the process in Pondicherry Central Govt. University)

Legally they were not called human beings; rather they were treated as ‘substance’ or property of the master. They were traded in the market for profit like animals. Fugitive slaves were given severe punishments and an ‘F’ stamp would be permanently drawn on forehead with hot iron to mark them as fugitives. It is said that during the reign of the emperors, Augustus and Tiberius, possibly half of the total population was of the bonded-slaves. Defeated and captivated people after the war would be kept as bonded-slaves and they would increase in number by birth. It means someone once born to slaves would also be a slave for life.

Business in the first Christian century was not very encouraging. There were no good employments for common people. Some people captured most of the wealth and most people were very poor. In spite of all these, the business continued on the road side markets and through the sea routes of the Mediterranean Sea. The rich people used to lend money to the poor with high rates of interest. There were factories, wholesale markets, travelling businessmen and retail shops everywhere.²

3. Conclusion: Anarchy, inequality and injustice of that first Christian century Roman Empire turned the common and suffering people to earnestly long and pray for the redeeming intervention of God. In that context, Jesus came as the Saviour and hope for redeeming the oppressed and suffering people. His teachings consoled and comforted them. His performances of wonderful deeds and miracles raised new hopes and aspirations in their miserable lives and his promises gave them assurance to long for the better reign of God to come in their life time and even in future.

² Dipankar Haldar, *New Testament Revisited* (Raghabpur: Raghabpur Seva Niketan, 2008), p. 12.