

Module 8



Module 8 VIDEO: The Rise and Fall of an Empire Part 2 During the fourth century AD, the immense Roman empire was in crisis for being torn apart by loyalties to four different emperors, two in the east and two in the west; and since Rome was the center of the empire the one who yielded the greatest power was Maxentius, the Western emperor who occupied Rome itself for six years. He was a despotic ruler, cruel and intoxicated with power, given to lavish displays in his own honor. In the video he was shown as resorting to sorcery, consulting with the pagan gods of Rome and divining the future from goats' innards, from whence the cryptic prediction came that "the enemy of Rome will be defeated." Naturally, Maxentius took this to mean that Constantine, the other Western emperor and who marches against him, will be defeated as the foretold enemy of Rome. Maxentius equated himself to Rome, and his enemy Constantine as the enemy of Rome.

From this brief glimpse of Maxentius' personality, one may deduce that character flaws in the person of the nation's leader may have a defining impact on the future not only of the leader as an individual, but also upon the nation he leads. The moral ascendancy of the person who stands as father (mother) to an entire nation should be without question, else he would tend to lead his countrymen to perdition (Giovanni Milani-Santarpia, *Moral Principles of the Ancient Romans*, 2009). In the case of Maxentius, his hubris and tyranny were the causes for his misguided leadership that eventually spelled out the end of his reign as emperor of Rome (Edward Gibbon, *Decline and fall of the Roman empire*, 1998). This gives us something to think about, particularly in the persons of our own leaders. For instance, many of our political leaders, a former US President, and a leading golf player who served as role model for many aspiring young people, were compelled to admit

before the public their illicit relationships with women. If such is the moral fibre of our leaders, then it is time to ask ourselves if the fall of our nation is not too far off.

QUESTION: How did Christianity become the institutionalized religion of late Rome?

The story of how Christianity became the official religion of 4th century Rome and the world religion it is today has assumed the status of legend. Christianity entailed the worship of an executed Jewish criminal; it was the religion of Jews and slaves. Therefore, its attribution to Constantine, 4th century Roman emperor, stretches the imagination and makes the story more intriguing. Two early Christian narrators tie the conversion of Constantine directly to his triumph in a military campaign against Maxentius (Dr. Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, *Christianity and the Roman Empire*, 2009). A vision or dream that came upon Constantine had Jesus Christ appearing to him and directing him to fight under Christian standards. Despite having fewer fighting men, being short on resources and fatigued with the effort, Constantine won the battle and attributed it to the message from Christ. From then, it is historically known that Constantine had given all citizens the freedom to choose and exercise their religion. He was, however, openly Christian, and despite his occasional practice of pagan rights, his acknowledgement of the role of Christ in the formation of the empire under him was sufficient to eventually make Christianity the principal religion nation-wide (Ralph Martin Novak, *Christianity and the Roman Empire: background texts*, 2001). Towards the end of his reign, Constantine had successfully “encouraged” the adoption of this new religion by the citizens of the empire.

REACTIONS TO POSTS

Post 1: Mary M.

The fall of Rome was attributed to so many factors, which Mary M. identifies as religious, military, economic, socio-cultural, and even health. It is interesting to note that one of the major factors that may have contributed to Rome's fall is economic in nature. The instance given in the post is the effect of inflation on the price of silver. It is surprising that this dilemma of economic instability was identified as contributory to the fall of the Roman empire. The same problem happens to beset modern nations, but even in the case of the economic depression and financial crisis, it is difficult to imagine any country losing its civilization and political power due to what is only a price "hiccup."

Another factor mentioned was the health of the citizens. According to Mary M., the presence of lead in the drinking water has caused heavy metal poisoning and subsequent problems in contraception. Again, while it may well be true that the health of a nation determines its stability, it is also difficult to attribute to a health problem the fall of the nation. This goes to show that statehood today has evolved the stability that is lacking in the vast Roman empire.

Post 2: William T.

In his post, William T. discussed the institutionalization of Christianity as the religion of Rome. The process was nothing short of phenomenal, it appears, beginning slowly and gradually among the lower classes of society and then suddenly and dramatically winning over no less than the emperor himself.

Three centuries of Christian persecution and derision could not have foreshadowed the sudden elevation of this poor man's faith to the official

doctrine of the empire, and eventually catapulting it to one of the world's great religions.

Looking at it from this perspective, one wonders whether it is not God's hand that had actually authored this part of human history. The conversion of Constantine is very much similar to the great transformations-of-the-heart in Christian history, such as that of Joseph, Mary's husband, who would have divorced her had it not been for the angel's visit in a dream; and that of Paul, whose vision of Jesus on the road of Damascus had completely redefined his faith, and gave the Church one of its greatest leaders. The direct conversion of Constantine, through a vision or a dream, is, true to form, one of the most extraordinary events in Western and Christian history both, in light of the dramatic change that remains relevant two millennia since then.