

# The (Strange) Roman World at the Time of Christ

Nancy J. Padgett, Ph.D.

[njpadgett@gmail.com](mailto:njpadgett@gmail.com)

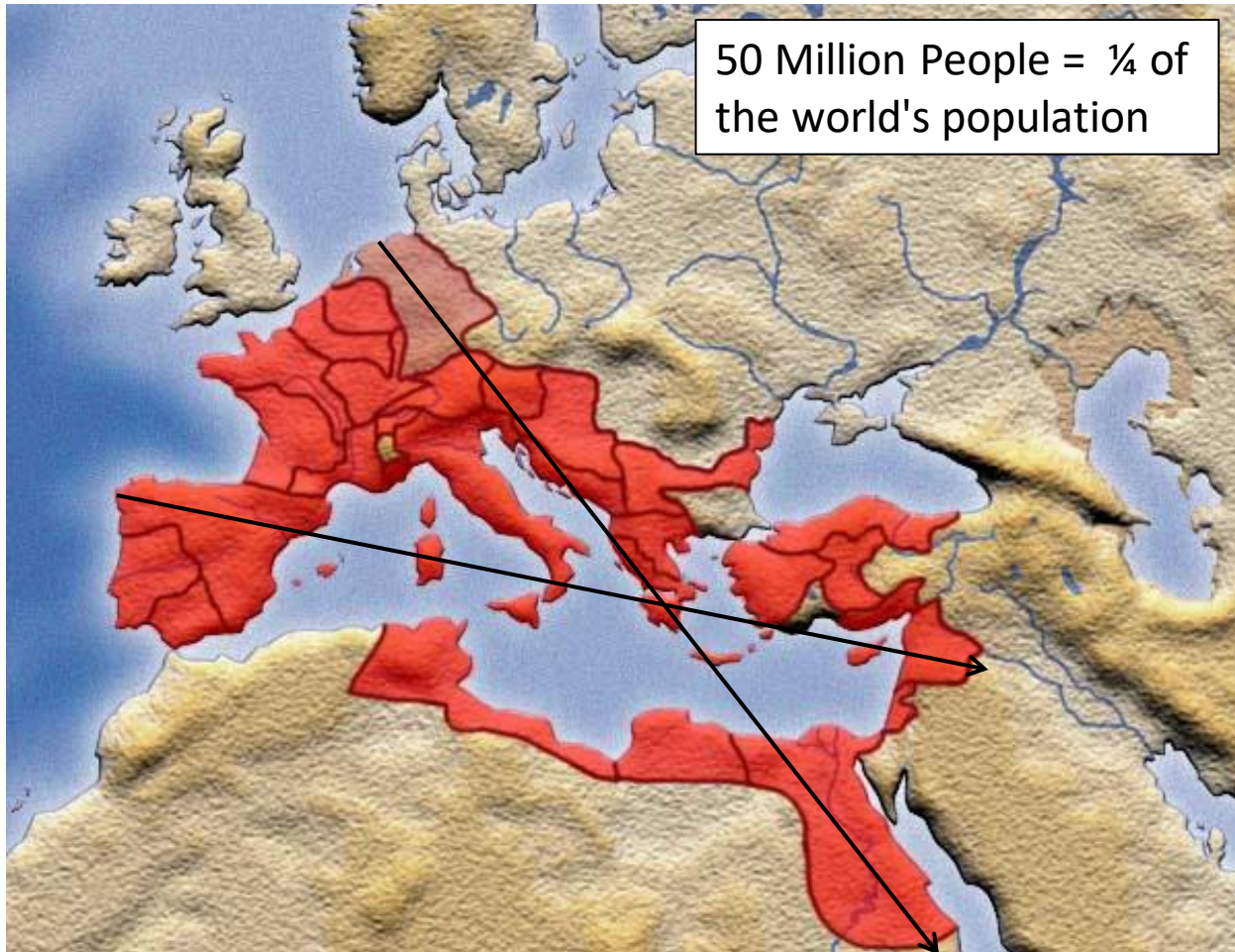
December 18, 2016

Lectures are posted on my history Web site:  
[www.historytravelswithnancy.com](http://www.historytravelswithnancy.com)

# The (Strange) Roman World at the Time of Christ

1. Daily Life in the Roman World
2. Roman Cities: A Trip to Ephesus
3. Lesser Beings: Women, Children, Slaves. The Elderly
- 4. Religions of the Roman Empire**
  - Setting the Stage for Christianity**

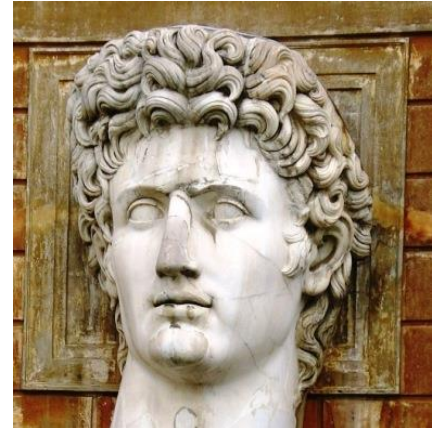
# How Big Is The Roman World?



# Who's Who

- Augustus (63BC--AD14, age 77).

Won the Civil Wars 31 BC. Proclaimed Emperor 27 BC, ending the Republic. As Emperor he became the one and only head of state, army, and religion.



- Livia, (59 BC--AD29, age 88). Married Augustus when she was 20. They had a long and happy marriage.



# Who's Who: Herod the Great

- The Herod at the time of the **birth** of Christ (Matthew 2.1) was Herod the Great of Judea. Ruled 37 years.
- Judea was a Roman client state, strategically crucial for keeping out the powerful and dreaded empire of the Parthians.
- Herod was also a paranoid: murdered one of his wives and engineered the execution of some of his sons. Not a nice person.

# Roman Religion Was a State Religion

- Observing the rituals of official Roman religion was not voluntary. (Local gods ok)
- Official religion rested on : the official gods, the state, and the army. The Roman Army often the transmitter of knowledge about Roman gods as the Empire expanded through military victory.

# Augustus as Head of Roman Religion

- The ruler was responsible for religion, for making sure the Roman state did not offend the gods. Augustus took his role seriously.
- He believed in traditional rites and traditional gods. They were vital for civil society. Needed to return to normalcy after the Civil War, and to remain peaceful.
  - He rebuilt at least 82 temples.
  - He reformed the priesthoods, becoming head of the four major ones.

# What Good Were The Gods?

- They did not provide a creation story like Adam and Eve,
- or a redemption story like Christ,
- or a code of ethics.
- They did not want a personal relationship with an individual human.
- So what did humans want from them?

**Benevolence.** The gods were powerful and capricious.

*The State: victory in war . The community: a good harvest. The family: a successful childbirth.*



# Many Tasks, Many Priests

- Religion determined most civil and political actions. For example, the Roman Senate could meet outside the Senate House, but not in just any old place. The priests had to first consult the gods. Starting a war? Getting married? Having a child? First consult a god using the proper rituals.
- Many tasks, so many priests were required. Priests were organized into colleges, each with its own sphere of influence. For example, one controlled the calendar.

# Who Made Up the Priesthood?

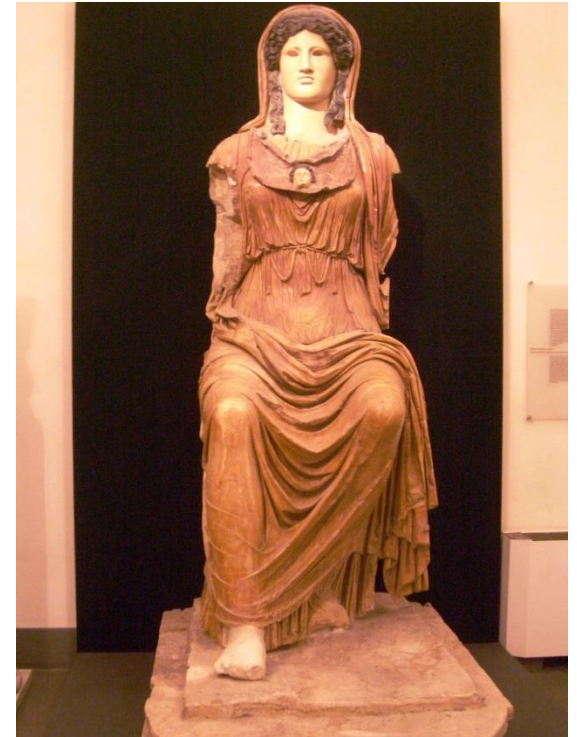
- A Roman priest came from the same narrow social elite that filled all the public offices of the Roman state. A part of the normal life of an elite Roman male, like being a member of the Rotary club.
- Women were present but not priestesses at most festivals and cult observations: Women could not perform animal sacrifices.

# Religion: No Text of Central Belief

- No central text(s) to link together the rites, the auspicia rules, and the many gods.
- Left the door open for personal premonitions and omens. Augustus believed it bad luck to accidentally put his right foot in his left shoe when he got out of bed in the morning. But good luck to start a journey in the rain.

# How Many Gods? Too Many to Keep Track of

- There were "great" gods like Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, all the way to narrow-bore gods like Imporcitor, the god of "ploughing with wide furrows."
- Augustus' special gods were Apollo and Victory.



*Minerva*

# Gods Shared Assignments

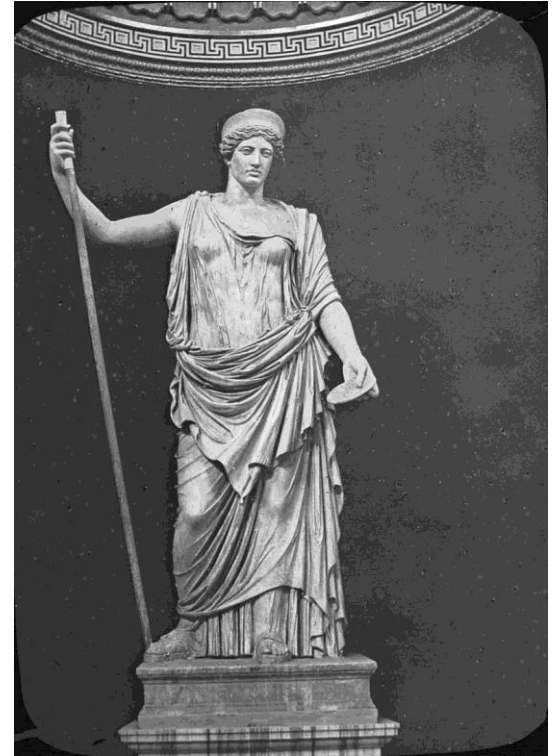
- Gods might co-share the work.
- Mars, Jupiter, Bellona, Victoria, even Juno : all connected to war.
- Juno and Diana were both goddesses of childbirth and youth.

*Mars Ultor, favored by Augustus*



# A God Might Have a Portfolio

- Gods often had more than one assignment.
- Juno had war, marriage, new beginnings, youthfulness, liveliness.



# Augustus and Livia

- To Romans, a multi-purpose god natural. Gods sharing assignments also natural. Fit in with their culture: very different and sometimes contradictory strands come together to make up the whole.
- Livia is both modest and richly adorned. Augustus believes in old-fashioned morality yet started an affair with Livia when his wife was pregnant and Livia was pregnant by her then- husband.

# A God Might Turn Into Another Creature

- Most did not have much personality.
- But some did. Ovid tells us Jupiter turned himself into a gentle –seeming bull. He wanted to seduce a princess, named Europa, and carry her off.

*The Golden Bull, The Getty Villa*





# Rembrandt: Jupiter Abducting Europa



# Women's Cults

- Cult reserved for women only: Bona Dea . One of Livia's duties was to host a festival to Bona Dea for elite matrons. She was the chief priestess. A widely embraced cult but one sometimes found suspicious: wine, sex??
- Other (more benign) goddesses and cults that were women-oriented: Juno and Diana. They looked over child-birth and infant care.

# Women: The Vestal Virgins

- Priestesses of Vesta, goddess of the hearth. One of the oldest of Roman cults
- The six Virgins cultivated the sacred fire that was not allowed to go out. Took a vow of chastity that lasted a lifetime. Guardians of important treaties and wills. Made the special sauce used in public animal sacrifices.
- Chosen between ages of 6 and 10; had to have two living parents and be a daughter of a free-born resident of Rome.
- Privileges: ride in a carriage preceded by a ceremonial armed guard. Place of honor at games and festivals. Could vote.

# More Gods Created All the Time

- Made perfect sense to the Romans. In the ancient world, gods and goddesses had active sex lives. They produced god-children.
- Or humans might (sort-of) create a new god. The current gods sent a signal, an event, to the humans, such as a victory in war. A donor or group of people petitioned the Senate for permission to start a new cult. Had to show adequate funds to support it—the temple, the priesthood, the festival days and games.
- The number of gods potentially infinite. Eventually Romans lost track of all their gods. Up steps the esteemed Roman scholar Varro. He wrote "Divine Antiquities," the Wikipedia of its day, to help.

# Where Could You Find a Roman God?

- Groves of trees, babbling brooks, crossroads, caves, theaters, and baths
- In the home: ancestral gods and household gods
- In a public places: a temple
- Temples throughout Empire  
Major one for Augustus at Ephesus. This one is in Croatia.



# Temples: Size and Materials

- Temples were super-sized. Exotic materials, like marble. Elaborate architectural detail. Huge cult statues within.

*The height of a temple's columns was about 8 times that of a present-day person.*





# What Did a God Look Like?

- A Roman. Men looked just-right muscular. Females wore fashionable Roman clothing.



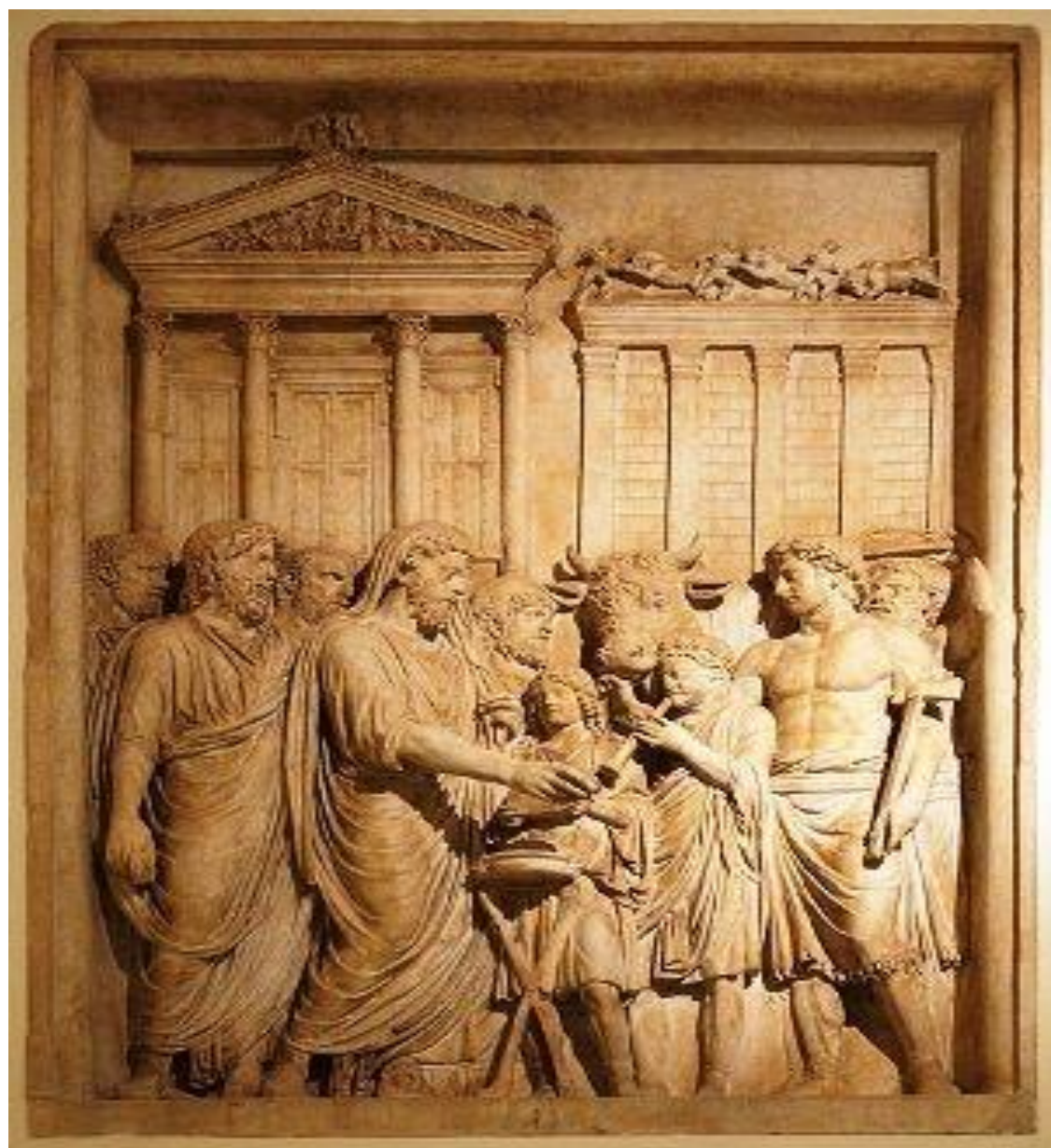
# Rites vs Prediction

- Rites : "sacra". Rituals are traditional, backward looking. Assured the gods the Roman people were behaving according to tradition.
- Prediction: "auspicia." These were the efforts to communicate with the divine about a future event. Might involve animals.
- For dangerous or unnatural matters, call in a special diviner, often Etruscan, called a "haruspex." He would order an animal sacrifice and examine the entrails of the sacrificed animal, mapping them to sections of the sky and see if all were aligned properly.



# Could You Talk to a Roman God?

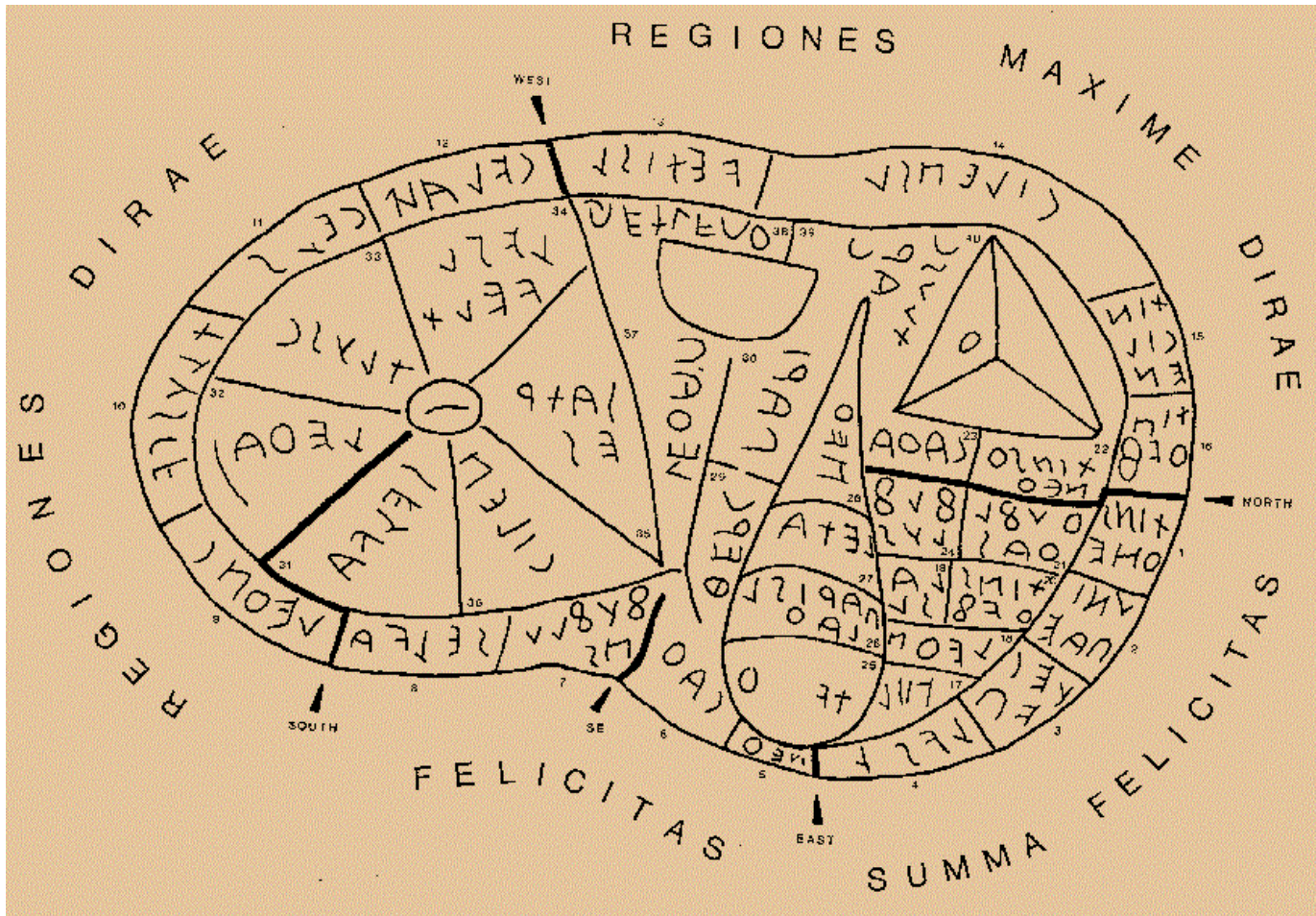
- No one expected to have a personal relationship with a god.
- Romans communicated with a god through rituals.
- Important to have NO deviations in the ritual
- Some rituals involved animal sacrifice, almost never a human sacrifice.





# How a Haruspex Divined

## Mapping the Sheep's Liver to the Heavens



Representation in Bronze of a Sheep's Liver

# Could a Human Be a God?

- For the first 500 years of Rome's existence, no. Then Julius Caesar came along. He was the first Roman ruler to be awarded divinity status, but only after his death.
- Augustus did not allow a god-cult for himself in Rome.
- But allowed in the Eastern cities (Asia). Tradition there of worshipping rulers, even while they were alive.

# Livia

- Augustus' wife, Livia, chief female religious leader. The chief priestess.
- Livia really really wanted Augustus to be declared a divinity, a god. She (allegedly) paid a Senator a spectacular sum to say he had seen Augustus ascend to heaven at his death to be with the gods.
- After that, divinity for every Emperor, and wives, was almost a done-deal.

# Other Religions of the Roman World

- Other religions tolerated/used/admired:
  - Etruscan
  - Judaism
  - Greek
  - Isis, from Egypt
  - Mithras, from Persia



# Religio vs Superstitio

- "Religio," : ok
- "Superstitio" : not ok
- Religio meant the traditional honors paid to the gods by everyone, especially by rituals set by the priestly colleges. Only the gods, and the priests, should see the future. Especially the future date of the death of the Emperor.



# Superstitio

- "Superstitio" established a direct link to the divine. Not ok, *because*: You could see the future. If you could see the future, you might control fate. Politically dangerous.
- Astrologers and magicians

Augustus riding his astrological moon sign, Capricorn the sea goat.





# Superstitio

## Judaism; Isis

- Judaic central beliefs and actual worship practices were regarded as "superstitio."  
--But Judaism was tolerated (on and off) because of its antiquity.
- Isis, as an ancient foreign religion from Egypt, sometimes allowed, sometimes banned.
- Would the Roman state classify Christianity as "superstitio?"

# Setting the Stage for Christianity

# Favorable Forces for Christ's Message

- Missing from the Empire: hospitals, public schools, orphanages, social services agencies.
- Missing: sense of mercy, pity for the less fortunate or the poor, obligation to help them.
- Missing: human rights. Roman law tilted toward property rights, not civil rights.

# Unfavorable Forces for Christianity

- The Empire gave internal stability to everyone after the prolonged crises of the Civil Wars, welcomed by almost everyone, at any price.
- The Empire was already tolerant (within limits): multi-cultural, multi-lingual, local gods

# Unfavorable Forces

- The Emperor was vigilant against "superstitio."
- The Roman Army was aggressive against external foes, again welcomed by everyone.
- Herod the Great is the bulwark against the Parthians. Judea in a strategic geographical position.

# Conclusion

- Hardly anyone is going to want to upset the applecart that was the Roman World under Augustus.
- Herod is a key part of Augustus' imperial strategy.
- The religious structure of the Romans is very very deep. Religion controlled time (the calendar), behavior both public and private, and space (temples, altars everywhere)

# Conclusion

- Not obvious that Christ's message and Christianity would stand much chance of success.
- Makes that success all the more extraordinary.