

A centurion asked Jesus to heal a sick loved one (Matt 8:5-13). In Luke's version this centurion is proposed as deserving because he loves the people and built a synagogue for them (Luke 7:3-5). A soldier who stood watch at the crucifixion of Jesus pierced his side to ascertain whether Jesus had yet died (John 19:34). These and other references to the military in the Gospels challenge the modern reader to consider what it might have meant or how it might have felt to live under domination by a foreign power and under military occupation of its forces.

In general, the army in the Roman empire took this shape: A legion consisted of about five thousand men. A legion was made up of ten cohorts, each of which included about 480 men. Each cohort contained six centuries (about eighty men, not the one hundred implied by the name), and each century was led by a centurion. A legion would have sixty centurions.

Centurions were the real professionals of the legion. The majority were seasoned military men, promoted from the ranks. While the period of service for most of the military eventually became fixed at twenty-five years, there was no limit for a centurion. He could serve until he died. As for his pay, the centurion received sixteen times that of the basic legionary salary! Clearly, the centurion possessed enormous military and social status and significant wealth.

In Capernaum, a centurion approaches Jesus and asks him to heal a sick servant at home. Who is this centurion? Some scholars do not believe that there were any Roman troops in Galilee at this time. The eighty soldiers he commanded were probably mercenaries, foreigners—or, if Judeans, they would likely be considered compromisers or traitors. The centurion himself was probably Roman or some other non-Judean (see Matt 8:10).

Luke's note that this centurion loved the people and built a men's community center (synagogue) for them is culturally plausible. Centurions had both the wealth and connections to perform such a favor. And whether authentic or feigned, "love for the people" would make life easier for a leader among the occupying military presence.

In this context the imagery of Psalm 122 takes on a new meaning. In its original setting, the pilgrim expresses joy and satisfaction with the visit and confidence on returning home that the Holy City will have peace within its walls and security within the towers (Ps 122:7). In the Herodian period, the pilgrim suspects that treachery is being plotted within the palace and knows foreign troops are spying on the many Jerusalem pilgrims from the imposing towers of Antonia, which overlooked the Temple.

The degree of hostility that occupying forces could stir is evident in a particular insult reported by Josephus (War 2, 12.1 [223-27]). On the feast of Passover during the prefecture of Cumanus (A.D. 48-52), a soldier atop a portico "turned his back to the Judeans, bent forward, raised his skirt in an indecent manner and broke wind noisily while keeping his posture." The people became livid with anger and began to

hurl stones at the soldiers. Cumanus sent soldiers into the area for crowd control, but Josephus reports (perhaps exaggerating) that more than thirty thousand people were trampled to death in the ensuing panic.

During his ministry, Jesus encountered friendly or sympathetic military personnel. In his last days, he fell into the hands of military who did their job with customary roughness: retaining a prisoner, preparing him for and putting him to death. Hostile fellow nationals played a role in arranging the arrest and subsequent execution of Jesus. In times of threat from outside, some people will resist and engage in protest or guerrilla tactics (for example, the Maccabees), others might flee and wait for better times (the Essenes), while still others will decide to collaborate with the conquerors as means to a better life (for example, those who bid for the privilege to serve as high priest when that became a possibility).

For a westerner who has never experienced a conquest by a foreign power, or military occupation by a conqueror's forces, my visit to Eastern Europe proved to be an eye-opener. Though recently liberated from foreign domination and military occupation, citizens of the Czech Republic still live with the consequences of that experience. There are daily reminders in the architectural styles of buildings and monuments from that era. There are also traces in the diverse opinions, personal lifestyles, and future hopes among the now liberated people. A week later, the archaeological remains of a Roman frontier outpost at Carnuntum, outside Vienna, prompted this visitor to think of another region dominated and occupied by that same world power at that same time: ancient Judea in the time of Jesus. The author of Hebrews reminds us: "In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood" (Heb 12:4). As always, a fresh perspective on the Gospels gives them new vibrancy and enhances their challenge.

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