
The Roman Provincial System

from “The Life and Epistles of St. Paul,” by W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson.

Roman Provincial System

From the time when Augustus united the world under his own power, the provinces were divided into two different classes. The business of the first Emperor’s life was to consolidate the imperial system under the show of administering a republic. He retained the names and semblances of those liberties and rights which Rome had once enjoyed. He found two names in existence, the one of which was henceforth inseparably blended with the Imperial dignity and military command, the other with the authority of the Senate and its civil administration. The first of these names was “Praetor,” the second was “Consul.” Both of them were retained in Italy, and both were reproduced in the Provinces as “Propraetor” and “Proconsul.”¹ He told the Senate and people that he would relieve them of all the anxiety of military proceedings and that he would resign to them those provinces where soldiers were unnecessary to secure the fruits of a peaceful administration. He would take upon himself all the care and risk of governing the other provinces, where rebellion might be apprehended and where the proximity of warlike tribes made the presence of the legions perpetually needful.

These were his professions to the Senate; but the real purpose of this ingenious arrangement was the disarming of the Republic and the securing to himself the absolute control of the whole standing army of the Empire.² The scheme was sufficiently transparent; but there was no sturdy national life in Italy to resist his despotic innovations, and no foreign civilized powers to arrest the advance of imperial aggrandizement. Thus it came to pass that Augustus, though totally destitute of the military genius either of Cromwell or Napoleon,

¹ It is important, as we shall see presently, to notice Dio Cassius’s further statement, that all governors of the Senate’s provinces were to be called Proconsuls, whatever their previous office might have been, and all governors of the Emperor’s provinces were to be styled Legati or Propraetors, even if they had been Consuls.

² cf Seutonium and Dio Cassius.

transmitted to his successors a throne guarded by an invincible army, and a system of government destined to endure through several centuries.

Hence we find in the reign, not only of Augustus, but of each of his successors, from Tiberius to Nero, the provinces divided into these two classes. One the one side we have those which are supposed to be under the Senate and the people. – The governor is appointed by lot, as in the times of the old republic. He carries with him the lictors and fasces, the insignia of a Consul; but he is destitute of military power. His office must be resigned at the expiration of a year. He is styled “Proconsul” and the Greeks, translating the term, call him “anthupatos,” which our English translators has rendered by the ambiguous word “deputy.” Acts 13:7, “The deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus.” Or, “Gallio was the deputy of Achaia.” Acts 18.

On the other side are the provinces of Caesar. The governor may be styled “Propraetor” or “ANTISTRATEIGOS”, but he is more properly “Legatus” or “PRESBUTEIS” – the representative or “Commissioner” or the Emperor. He goes out from Italy with all the pomp of a military commander, and he does not return until the Emperor recalls him.³ And to complete the symmetry and consistency of the system, the subordinate districts or these imperial provinces are regulated by the Emperor’s “Procurator” (EPITROPOS), or “High Steward.” The New Testament, in the strictest conformity with the other historical authorities of the period, gives us examples of both kinds of provincial administration. We are told by Strabo, and by Dio Cassius, that “Asia” and “Achaia” were assigned to the Senate; and the title, which in each case is given to the Governor in the Acts of the Apostles, is “Proconsul.” The same authorities inform us that Syria was an imperial province, and no such title as “Proconsul” is assigned by the sacred writers to “Cyrenius Governor of Syria,” (Luke 2:2) or to Pilate, Festus, and Felix, the Procurators

³ All these details are stated, and the two kinds of governors very accurately distinguished in the 53rd Book of Dio Cassius, ch. 13. It should be remarked that EPARXIA (the word still used for the subdivisions of the modern Greek Kingdom) is applied indiscriminately to both kinds of provinces.

of Judea, which was a dependency of that great and unsettled province.⁴

Dio Cassius informs us, in the same passage where he tells us that Asia and Achaia were provinces of the Senate, that Cyprus was retained by the Emperor for himself, along with Syria and Cilicia. If we stop here, we naturally ask the question, and some have asked the question rather hastily, how it comes to pass that St. Luke speaks of Sergius Paulus by the style of "Proconsul." But any hesitation concerning the strict accuracy of the sacred historian's language is immediately set at rest by the very next sentence of the secular historian, in which he informs us that Augustus restored Cyprus to the Senate in exchange for another district of the Empire, a statement which he again repeats in a later passage of his work. It is evident, then, that the governor's style and title from this time forward would be "Proconsul." But this evidence, however satisfactory, is not all that we possess. Inscriptions, which could easily be adduced, supply us with the names of additional governors who were among the predecessors or successors of Sergius Paulus.

=====
Grace Notes is a ministry of Austin Bible Church,
Austin, Texas

<http://www.austinbiblechurch.com>

For information about regular Bible studies, write:

Warren Doud

1705 Aggie Lane, Austin, Texas 78757

E-Mail: wdoud@gracenotes.info

URL: <http://www.gracenotes.info>

⁴ The word invariably used in the NT is HEIGEMON. This is a general term, like the Roman "Praeses" and the English "Governor", as may be seen by comparing Luke 2:2 with 3:1 and observing that the very same word is applied to the offices of Procurator of Judea, the Legatus of Syria, and the Emperor himself.
