

1.6

Centurions in the New Testament

A centurion (pronounced sen-tyoor´ee-uhn) was the commander of a hundred soldiers in a Roman legion. Six “centuries” (each led by a centurion) made up a cohort, which was led by a tribune. Ten cohorts comprised a Roman legion, which consisted of six thousand men. Centurions were prestigious members of a relatively small class of military leaders. They received substantial pensions on retirement and would be counted among the local notables of any town.

Six centurions are mentioned in New Testament narratives.

The unnamed centurion in Capernaum: A story in Matthew 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10 tells of Jesus healing the son or servant of a centurion in Capernaum. This seems to be the same incident recounted in John 4:46–53, although in that case the man is not identified as a centurion.

In Matthew’s version, the centurion comes to Jesus, begging him to heal his servant (or, possible, son), who is paralyzed and in terrible distress. The centurion insists that Jesus need not come to his house because, as one acquainted with authority, he knows that if Jesus merely speaks the word, the matter will be done. Jesus replies that he has not seen such faith anywhere in Israel, and he does speak the word that heals the servant in that very hour.

Luke's version of the story is slightly different. Instead of coming to Jesus himself, he sends Jewish leaders to make the request on his behalf. These leaders tell Jesus that the centurion is worthy of such benefit because "he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us" (7:5).

The unnamed centurion at the crucifixion: The Synoptic Gospels all report that a centurion was present at the crucifixion of Jesus (Matt. 27:54; Mark 15:39; Luke 23:47). The usual assumption is that this person would have been in charge of the soldiers responsible for the execution, including those who offered him bitter wine to drink, cast lots for his clothing, and mocked him on the cross. Still, both Matthew and Mark report that when Jesus dies, the centurion declares, "Truly this man was God's Son." In Luke, when Jesus dies, the centurion praises God and says, "Certainly this man was innocent."

Cornelius, a centurion in Caesarea: The book of Acts reports the story of the conversion of Cornelius, whose baptism sparked a controversy in the church concerning admission of gentiles (Acts 10:1–11:18; cf. 15:7–9).

Cornelius is said to belong to the Italian Cohort and to be "a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God" (Acts 10:2). Cornelius is directed by God in a vision to send for Simon Peter, who was in Joppa (modern Tel Aviv). The next day, God also gives Peter

a vision just before the men from Caesarea arrive, letting him know that “God shows no partiality” (10:34)

Later, as Peter is telling Cornelius about the resurrection of Jesus, the Holy Spirit falls on all who are present in a manner reminiscent of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–12). The realization that God pours out the Holy Spirit “even on the Gentiles” (10:45) leads to a phase in the church’s mission, and ultimately to a redefinition of its basic identity.

Unnamed centurions in Jerusalem: The book of Acts reports that centurions were instrumental in controlling a riot in Jerusalem that had been instigated by Jews upset with Paul (Acts 21:27–32). The exact number of centurions is not specified, but if a full cohort were employed, as seems to be case, then the number of centurions would have been six.

The centurions and other soldiers prevent the mob from beating Paul, but after his testimony further antagonizes them, the tribune orders him to be flogged. Paul then speaks to one of the centurions, asking if this is legal, since he is a Roman citizen. As a result, he is not flogged but brought to address the Jewish Council (22:24–30).

In the days that follow, a plot to assassinate Paul is revealed and one of the centurions delivers Paul’s message regarding this to the tribune (23:17). The latter orders two centurions to take Paul to Caesarea where he could be kept more safely, pending a hearing from the Roman governor (23:23–24).

Unnamed centurion in Caesarea: Acts 24:23 reports that a centurion in Caesarea was charged with keeping Paul in custody when the Roman governor Felix wished to delay sentencing him. This centurion was explicitly ordered to let Paul have some liberty and to allow Paul's friends to take care of his needs.

Julius, a centurion in Caesarea: The book of Acts reports that a centurion name Julius is charged with transferring Paul from Caesarea to Rome (27:1). Julius apparently serves in the same city where Cornelius was found some years earlier, but he is said to belong to the Augustan Cohort, not the Italian Cohort.

Julius is mentioned several times in the narrative of Paul's sea voyage (27:6, 11, 31, 43). At first, he does not listen to Paul when the latter warns of hazards; eventually he allows Paul to tell him what the soldiers should or should not be allowed to do and he even takes measures to insure Paul's safety when others wish to kill him.