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Prison Conditions in the Roman World

Types of Imprisonment

Although Ezra 7:26 lists imprisonment as one of several recognized forms of legal punishment, there are no clear references to imprisonment being imposed as a legal penalty in the New Testament. This is in keeping with Roman policies, which did not view the purpose of imprisonment as reform or punishment; imprisonment was simply a means to hold on to those awaiting judgment. Prisoners were held *before* trial; once a verdict was rendered, they might be executed, beaten, or sent into exile, but they would not normally be sentenced to more time in prison.

The New Testament does offer many examples of such pretrial imprisonment: Acts 4:3; 12:3–4; 16:23–24; 23:35; Philippians 1:7–26. The binding or chaining of Jesus before he was brought to Pilate may also reflect some sort of formal arrest procedures (Matt. 27:2; Mark 15:1). Paul's imprisoning of Christians (Acts 8:3) probably refers to his handing them over to the custody of synagogue authorities who would then administer the penalty provided for in Israel's law: a flogging of up to forty lashes (Deut. 25:1–3; 2 Cor. 11:24; Acts 22:19). Pretrial retention, however, could be easily abused and become, in effect, a means of punishment. This appears to have been the case with John the Baptist, for whom no trial was

scheduled (Mark 6:17–20), and with Paul, who was held without trial for two years in Caesarea (allegedly because the governor wanted a bribe to release him, or wanted to appease the Jews whom Paul had offended; see Acts 24:26–27). Debtors unable to pay their creditors were also imprisoned, sometimes in special debtors' prisons, until their debts were paid. Luke 12:58–59 makes precise reference to the “officers” who in Roman times had charge of such prisons (see also Matt. 5:25; 18:30).

Prison Conditions

Conditions in ancient prisons were often harsh. Most prisoners wore chains; their feet might be shackled, their hands manacled or even attached to their neck by another chain, and their movements further restricted by a chain fastened to a post. The existence of laws prohibiting chains that were too short or too restrictive indicates that such practices were employed often enough to merit regulation. The very word “chains” became a synonym for imprisonment. Some prisoners were also kept in wooden stocks, devices to restrain the feet, hands, or even the neck of an individual (see Acts 16:24).

Prisons were often very dark (see Isa. 42:7); the inner area of the prison mentioned in Acts 16:24 was probably without windows.

Although solitary confinement was known, prisoners generally were kept grouped together, accused and condemned, men and women alike. Overcrowding was not infrequent (Isa. 24:22). Prisons often had poor air circulation, a lack of hygienic facilities, rats and vermin,

and food of poor quality. Unscrupulous guards might at times use the withholding of food or even outright torture to extort money from prisoners or their relatives.

Although various rulers, especially in Roman imperial times, struggled to enact reforms to prevent the most severe abuses, the quality of prison life largely remained the responsibility of local officials, and conditions varied considerably from place to place. Somewhat ominously, Hebrews 13:3 speaks of “those who are in prison” in parallel with “those who are being tortured”; the two groups are apparently assumed to be the same.

Respectable individuals were sometimes accorded a form of “house arrest,” guarded by soldiers but allowed a relative measure of comfort and freedom. They could, for example, receive visitors and transact business while waiting for their case to come to court or be resolved. According to the book of Acts, something of this nature was the situation Paul experienced in Rome (28:16, 30–31). Paul, however, indicates in 2 Corinthians 11:23 that he has been imprisoned multiple times (cf. 2 Cor. 6:5), and that letter was written prior to his imprisonments in Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome, as reported in Acts 22–28. The exact circumstances or longevity of those imprisonments are difficult to determine. In Philippians 1:7, 13, Paul says that he is “in chains” (NRSV, “imprisonment”) but it is not known whether he means that literally or in a metaphorical sense (as

the NRSV assumes). Elsewhere, 2 Timothy 2:9 presents Paul as complaining that he has been “chained like a criminal.”

Whatever the conditions, imprisonment always brought social disgrace, casting aspersions on the person’s reputation and generating a significant loss of honor. This is clearly reflected in 2 Timothy 1:16, where Onesiphorus is singled out for praise as one who was not ashamed of Paul’s chain. In Philippians, Paul tries to turn the humiliation factor to his own ironic advantage: he will not truly be put to shame if his personal humiliation results in the exaltation of Christ (1:20). Likewise, 2 Timothy 2:9 affirms that, even if Paul is chained, the word of God is not.

All told, five New Testament letters are said to have been written from prison: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Timothy, and Philemon. All of these are attributed to Paul; they are sometimes called the “captivity letters” and treated as a group.