

## Vegetius & the Fall of Rome: Loss of Thought: the Decline of Righteousness Leads to the Ascendancy of Wickedness; Paul's Challenge to Timothy, 2 Tim 2:2

We are fortunate to have available a remarkable work on warfare, written by a Roman, Flavius Vegetius Renatus, sometime between 383 and 450, that explains many of the reasons for the decline of Roman military power. Vegetius' *De Re Militari*. (p. 127)

The manual is a description of the earlier Roman system of military conscription, training, strategy, and tactics that, Vegetius said, had been forgotten in his own day—so much so that it was necessary to relearn it all from the study of books.

Vegetius was a professed Christian who nevertheless believed that military victory came from training and discipline—not from faith. Further, the analyst was concerned with the urgent military problem of his day—how to preserve rather than expand the Empire. Where Vegetius rises far above his modern military critics is in his recognition that effective fighting required an integrated army, one that deployed skirmishers, heavy and light cavalry and heavy and light infantry in balanced coordination.

And his main point, that Rome's chief military problem was its weak infantry, was undoubtedly sound. Vegetius says that down to the death of the Emperor Gratian \grā'-shē-an\ (A.D. 383):

"footsoldiers wore breastplates and helmets. But when, because of negligence and laziness, parade ground drills were abandoned, the customary armour began to seem heavy since the soldiers rarely ever wore it. Therefore, they first asked the emperor to set aside the breastplates and mail and then the helmets. So our soldiers fought the Goths without any protection for chest and head and were often beaten by archers.

"Although there were many disasters, which led to the loss of great cities, no one tried to restore breastplates and helmets to the infantry. Thus it happens that troops in battle, exposed to wounds because they have no armour, think about running and not about fighting."<sup>1</sup> (pp. 128-29)

4. Predictably, Rome ultimately fell from within at the hands of barbarians. The fall took place over a 66-year period beginning in August of A.D. 410 when the Visigoth Alaric \al'-a-rik\ invaded Rome and ending in 476 when Odovacer \ō-dō-vä'-kar\, a barbarian from Germany, abdicated the last Roman emperor Romulus Augustulus \rām'-ya-las-aw-gus'-cha-las\ abolishing the title and the office and thus ending the Western Roman Empire.
5. What Vegetius describes about the Roman military's decline can be applied to the similar decline among Christians in twenty-first-century America.

<sup>1</sup> Arther Ferrell, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 127-29.

6. Let's take what Vegetius reveals about the mental attitude of those in both the Roman military and government and compare that to the present-day Christian warrior, his pastor, and the church where he is a member.
7. This exercise is designed to show how lax training of martial infantry can be used to illustrate lax training of spiritual infantry. In our example we will use the vocabulary of General Vegetius but obviously other aspects of the infantry warrior's panoply could also be included.
8. Vegetius begins his analysis by referring to the Roman legionary as a "**footsoldier**." Throughout Scripture the character traits, behavior patterns, and lifestyle of the believer are described as a "walk." Some walk in "righteousness" while others walk in "wickedness."

**Psalm 26:1** - A Psalm of David. Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked [הלך *halach*: behavior patterns, character traits, lifestyle] in my integrity [תם *tōm*: harmony of thought and resident doctrine], and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.

**Proverbs 4:19** - The way [דerek *derek*: behavior patterns, character traits, lifestyle] of the wicked [רשע *rasha'*: guilty of wrongdoing & of sinning against others] is like darkness; they do not know over what they stumble.

9. We are familiar with the words *halach* and *derek* translated "walked" and "way." The former is linked with "integrity" (*tōm*) while the latter is linked with "wicked" (*rasha'*).
10. "Integrity (*tōm*) is defined as follows:

**תם *tōm*.** An attitude or action found to be praiseworthy. The Hebrew notion that an action or way of life is "complete" or "integral" refers in the first instance to a coincidence of thought, word, and deed that itself harmonizes with the norms governing the life of the human community. (p. 707)

The use of the term to characterize a way of life can be observed in the use of the word group in conjunction with the words for "walk" and "path" or "way" (Ps.26:1). (p. 708)

The integrity of one's life is the foundation of one's hope. It brings reward: whoever walks with integrity (*tōm*) walks securely (Prov. 10:9). (p. 709)

Yahweh is a shield to "those who walk blamelessly" (Prov. 2:7). This belief explains the psalmist's repeated declaration that he walks in integrity (*tōm*, Ps. 26:1) as well as his prayer to be judged according to his righteousness and blamelessness (*tōm*) 7:9).<sup>2</sup> (p. 710)

11. The antonym in context is "wicked," and is defined as follows:

<sup>2</sup> G. Johannes Botterwick, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. David E. Green (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 15:707-710.

רָשָׁע *rasha'*. In the Old Testament *rasha'* refers primarily to those who "on the basis of their deeds should expect to be declared guilty in court."<sup>3</sup>

12. A person is guilty when he violates righteous standards whether it is sin, human good, or evil. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* elaborates:

רָשָׁע *rasha'*. In the Qal the verb means to be wrong, unjust, or guilty, and in the Hiphil, it means either to condemn as guilty or to act wickedly. In the Old Testament the root *rasha'* appears as the most important antonym of *sedeq* "righteousness. In contrast to *sedeq* it denotes the negative behavior of evil thought, words and deeds, a behavior not only contrary to God's character, but also hostile to the community and which at the same time betrays the inner disharmony and unrest of a man. (p. 863)

The book of Proverbs contains a great deal of antithetical parallelism, which contrasts the *rasha'* and the *sedeq* in black and white terms. The focus is on both the quality of lifestyle and the results of these two ways of living. Whereas the wicked forsake God, the righteous cling to him. Though the wicked are oppressive and dishonest, the righteous are upright and lovers of truth.

The inner lives of the wicked correspond to their actions. They are vicious, haughty, treacherous, vile, polluted, and unstable. One might expect that such people would always be kept under the restraints of law and order and suffer defeat every moment of their life. Not so. Job was troubled with the strange topsy-turvy nature of the moral order here and now (Job 9:24; 10:3; 16:11; 21:7; 17; 28). The Preacher struggled with this absurdity (Ecclesiastes 7:15; 8:14), as did Jeremiah (12:1).<sup>4</sup> (p. 864)

13. The standard by which the Roman soldier functioned was the established military code of SPQR. Trained in the art of war as it was understood in their day, they were disciplined to be efficient combatants on the field of battle where their integrity as a defender of Rome was exemplified.
14. Believers in Jesus Christ must become good soldiers for Christ. This was the imperative Paul expressed to Timothy in:

**2 Timothy 2:2** - The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses [ students of Paul's ], entrust [ παρατίθημι, *paratithēmi* ] these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

<sup>3</sup> ———, eds. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. Douglas W. Scott (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 14:3.

<sup>4</sup> G. Herbert Livingston, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 863-64.