



## [1 Clement 37.1-5](#)

The Roman army as a model for Christian behaviour

**Date:** 90 CE to 100 CE

**Place:** Rome

**Language:** Greek

**Category:** Christian

**Literary genre:** Letter

**Title of work:** 1 Clement

**Reference:**

37.1-5

### **Commentary:**

The text known as *1 Clement* is in fact an epistle written from the Christian community in Rome to that in Corinth, and is one of the earliest extant Christian documents outside the New Testament. The identity of the author remains very indefinite, and scholars have offered various suggestions over the years. One plausible, but by no means certain suggestion is that the “Clement” to whom the letter is ascribed was a freedman or son of a freedman of the house of Domitian’s cousin, Titus Flavius Clemens, and as was customary had taken his name from that of his owner. This theory is based on the fact that Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 67.14.1 informs us that Titus Flavius Clemens was executed and his wife, Domitilla, banished for “atheism,” a charge often levelled at those who “drifted into Jewish ways” (for the connection with Titus Flavius Clemens, see James Lightfoot, *Apostolic Fathers*, p. 61, D. W. F. Wong, “Natural and Divine Order,” p. 87, and James Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome*, p. 31-34). It could be therefore that the pair were Christian sympathisers or even converts. Moreover, archaeological and inscriptional evidence suggests that there was a Christian burial ground on Domitilla’s land (see Jeffers, *Conflict at Rome*, p. 48-89).

The letter is contemporaneous with Revelation, also composed towards the end of the first century CE (for a concise discussion of the dating of the letter, see David Horrell, *Social Ethos*, p. 240-241), and provides an interesting comparison with this apocalyptic source, written to the Christians of Asia Minor, due to the differing attitudes that *1 Clement* reveals about the Roman church at this time. One of the most significant divergences is that while Revelation portrays the Roman empire as an ally of Satan, the antichrist and “whore” comparable to Babylon (see the discussions of Revelation 13:11-18; 16:1-19; 17:1-18), *1 Clement* is much more positive towards Roman rule, and promotes the advantages of security and peace which became a powerful selling point for Roman government (see 1 Thessalonians 5:3, where Paul criticises those who over-rely on Rome for “peace and security” rather than looking to God). Some have suggested that the opening of the letter (1.1) implies persecution (“sudden and repeated misfortunes and reverses that have happened to us”), but as Laurence Welborn argues, the evidence for significant “persecution” of Christians under Domitian (during whose reign the letter was very possibly written) is not well-evidenced, and the troubles of which the author speaks more likely refers to internal problems in the Roman church (Welborn, “On the Date of First Clement,” p. 35-48). Regardless, *1 Clement* is an important source for understanding that the early Christians were not uniform in their response to Roman rule, and while some were taught to oppose it at all costs, others were encouraged to embrace the benefits it brought, and see Roman authorities as legitimate, or even divinely sanctioned (on this issue in particular, see *1 Clement* 60.4 – 61.3).

Christian Eggenberger (*Die Quellen der politischen Ethik*, p. 189-193) argues that there was no real occasion for the composition of *1 Clement* – there was no specific crisis to speak of that the author felt needed an immediate response. Rather, the letter is an *apologia* to the imperial regime assuring the Roman authorities that the church was loyal, and wanting to secure the government’s favour. While Eggenberger’s thesis was not widely accepted in relation to the overall purpose of the letter, he certainly makes a strongly defensible point about the political stance of the author, which is clear from 60.4-61.3, where the Roman governing authorities are confirmed as God’s authorised agents on earth, which the Christian community must submit to. There is a general concern expressed in *1 Clement* with the maintenance of proper order (see David Horrell, *Social Ethos*, p. 255-258). The natural



universe is used as an example of how God’s creations co-exist just as their creator intended. Day and night commence when they are supposed to, the sun, stars, and moon all keep their proper courses, and the earth produces sufficient food for all its inhabitants. The sea does not flow beyond its proper boundaries, and the seasons change at their given times. Every aspect of the cosmos exists in “harmony and peace” (20.1-12). As Louis Sanders recognised (*L’Hellénisme de Saint Clément*, p. 109-130), there is strong reminiscence of Stoic writings here (see Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2, for instance; for an insightful exploration of the concepts of order and disorder in the first century, see F. Gerald Downing, *Order and (Dis)order*). The army imagery in the present passage provides a perfect example of how peace and concord are achieved when each agent displays the appropriate obedience and submission for their rank and position (Annie Jaubert, “Les sources de la conception militaire,” p. 79, claims that this is the first time in a Christian writing that a military example is used to encourage the mutual subordination of the Christian community). The discourse about obedience in *1 Clement* is dual layered, with the assertions made about wider societal obedience to Roman authorities utilised in order to encourage obedience to those of a higher position within the Christian community. Respect for Roman authorities therefore provides a model for behaviour within the church.

Some have questioned whether the author of *1 Clement* definitely has the Roman army in mind here, as it did not have a rank that commanded fifty men (37.3). This group size is, however, referred to in the LXX (e.g. in Exodus 18:21 and Deuteronomy 1:15). It is possible that while the author’s knowledge of army structure may have come from the LXX, he still has the Roman army in mind (so, Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana*, p. 108-109). This would seem especially likely given the reference to the divine appointment of Roman authorities in 60.4-61.3, where the author is clearly wanting to show that Roman rule (of which the army was an integral part) was something God-sanctioned, and to be respected by the Christian community. Moreover, the fact that the author refers to “the soldiers who serve under *our* (???) commanders” reinforces the argument that he is thinking of an army that was actually relevant to his audience. Christians should take note of a hierarchy in which discipline and submission are of paramount importance. The author’s underlying point is that the community should submit to their church elders (57.1-2), but the army provides an ideal model of a pyramid of authority, where each member answers to their superior and obediently submits to their commands. This enables an effective structure where each constituent part complements every other, and is perfectly in keeping with God’s plan.

Keywords in the original language:

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Thematic keywords in English:

- [body](#)
- [captain](#)
- [centurion](#)
- [command](#)
- [military tribune](#)
- [obedience](#)
- [prefect](#)
- [rank](#)
- [Roman army](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [soldier](#)
- [unity](#)



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**Other sources connected with this document:** Text

## [1 Thessalonians 5:3](#)

"Peace and Security"

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