

The Third Horseman

Revelation 6:5-6

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2016-02-28

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Text

5 And when He opened the third seal I heard the third living being saying, "Come!" And I looked and, behold, a black horse! And he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand. 6 And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living beings saying, "A 'quart' of wheat for a denarius and three 'quarts' of barley for a denarius; but do not harm the olive oil and the wine."¹

Introduction - background material that would have already been in the minds of John's first-century audience

We have come up to the third horseman of the apocalypse. The demonized Tiberius was the first horseman bring the judgment of imperialistic expansionism. The demonized Caligula was the second horseman bringing the judgment of conflict and death. And he especially brought judgment upon the wealthy and the powerful. So if you think tat the wealthy always get off Scott-free,mtgat is not true. They had already been hammered by Caligula. And verses 5-6 deal with the next emperor, Claudius.² And these verses show economic judgments.

Virtually everyone believes that these symbols portray famine. But what I want to point out is that this was not a famine brought about by drought, locusts, or plant disease. If it had been,my he wine and the oil would have been affected as well. This was a famine that came from government manipulation of the economy. And it appeared to be well-meaning. Claudius wanted to fix some of the problems started by the previous two emperors. But it was disastrous.

And to understand the symbols being given here (like the first century readers would have understood them), it might be helpful to have a little bit of history that would have still been fresh in their minds. In fact, they probably still had some of his coins in their purse. Just a glance at some of those coins would have reminded them of some of this history.

We have seen that the symbols of the previous emperors were on the coins

¹ Translation of the Majority Text by Wilbur M. Pickering

² There are a number of writers who believe this rider represents Claudius. Hayusrath and Huxley say, "The famine under Claudius: the black horse."^[^fn2] Adolf Hausrath, Leonard Huxley, *The Time of the Apostles, volume 4*, (Oxford: Williams and Norgate, 1895), p. 267. This is also the position of James Madison MacDonald, in *The Life and Writings of St. John*, (New York: Scribner, Armstrong & Co, 1877), p. 198. Adam Clark also saw the black horse as referring to the famines under Claudius.

that they issued, and the same is true of the coins of Claudius. On the back of your outlines I have given you pictures of several coins that show his horse connected with symbols of economic justice and fairness, and I have several coins that show his hand holding a pair of scales. Claudius issued many versions of those coins to symbolize economic justice.

But it is really the opposite of justice. The moment the civil government injects itself into managing the market place problems begin to happen. And they happened with a vengeance under Claudius. Where Caligula's actions robbed *individual* citizens (especially the wealthy), Claudius managed to institutionalize the evil of government robbery by setting up all kinds of bureaus and agencies directly accountable to the executive office. It was a massive bureaucratization that happened under Claudius. He had a department of agriculture, a department of finances, a department of this, and a department of that. And he was a very able administrator, so making a smoothly running bureaucracy came naturally. And it took centuries before Rome was able to cast those off.

But before we look at the bad points, let me speak about his good points. When Caligula was assassinated, Claudius hid in the palace behind some curtains because he thought for sure that he was going to be killed. Friendly Praetorians found him (they saw his feet sticking out from under the curtains), declared him to be the next Caesar, and put him into safe custody until the Senate (who wanted to kill Claudius and exterminate the entire imperial line) had calmed down. Once the Praetorian guard had managed to convince the Senate (or perhaps to force the Senate) to elect Claudius as the next emperor, Claudius sought to prove himself to be a humble and effective emperor. He immediately pardoned all the assassins. He also humbly encouraged the Senate to take on more powers, to truly debate issues (even if they disagreed with him) and involved himself in their debates. He did have a lot of good features.

If you were to compare these emperors to modern candidates, Caligula was worse than any president we have had in office in terms of his own crimes. In contrast, Claudius was a "conservative." He tried to move Rome back to the old religion and some of the old practices. On domestic policies he was centralist. On foreign policies he was a War Hawk. His hawkishness can be seen in that he resumed conquest with a vengeance. His conquest of Brittainia was perhaps his most celebrated achievement. It's a pretty interesting story. Britain was considered to be a very attractive target because of what was thought to be rich mineral deposits (especially tin and gold) and slaves that could add to Rome's wealth. Claudius actually went to

Britain when he brought reinforcements and elephants. The elephants totally wowed the Britons. They had never seen anything like that before. Anyway, he annexed Thrace, Noricum, Pamphylia, Lycia, Mauretania, and Judea, bringing them directly under his rule. No self-rule for them any longer. And he established new colonies of Roman citizens to secure the new holdings. So he was an imperialist much like Tiberius.

But he was also praised for his judicial reforms within the system. He got rid of a lot of corruption. He raised the age of jurors so that there would be more experience in the jury pool. And he streamlined the judicial system so well that the huge backlog of cases was quickly caught up.

He freed the island of Rhodes from Roman rule because of their loyalty and he exempted Troy from taxes. He gave new freedoms and rights to Jews throughout the empire. In fact, that is a critical point in understanding this book. Even though early in his reign Claudius had expelled the Jews from the city of Rome, that action was largely because of their riots against Christianity. But over time the Jews gained more and more influence in Claudius court. The Jewish king seemed to have a huge control over Claudius. He was somehow involved in crowning him as emperor, and I have a coin showing two Jewish authorities crowning Claudius. So the influence of the Jewish leaders in Roman politics began with Claudius and dominated under Nero. By the time of Nero, God was weaving an increasing unity between Rome and Israel to prepare for a united persecution of Christians that would begin in AD 62 and heat up in AD 64 under Nero. But Claudius granted enormous rights to Jews. He passed laws protecting some of the rights of slaves. It was now considered murder to kill a slave. That was unheard of. And there were a lot of other civil rights that he championed.

However, just like modern government, there were a lot of pork barrel projects that made him popular, including building famous aqueducts, roads, canals, and adding to the arable land through drainage systems, paying for Colosseums, etc.

And he tried hard to please the Senate. But he never was successful. In fact, there were at least six attempts to assassinate him, and over the course of his reign a total of 35 Senators and 300 knights were executed. So despite his best efforts to win the favor of the Senate, there was a lot of tension between the legislative and executive branches under his rule.

But even though there is a continuation of some of the evils from previous seals, each seal focuses on what was especially characteristic of that regime.

And you need to have a little background to understand why famine and economic woes were especially characteristic of Claudius' regime. Acts 11 says that the whole empire experienced severe famine under his rule.

There had always been government theft and ungodly taxation. In fact, the taxation under Caligula was horrific. But despite that taxation, Caligula had not managed to centralize everything under one administration. That judgment happened under Claudius.

Claudius managed to centralize more and more of the Empire under his rule. He did it because the philosophers said that this was the ideal, and he wanted to be the ideal emperor. He was a scholar who studied the classics extensively and who wrote voluminously. And he was convinced that the best government was a government that pretty much oversaw every aspect of the economy. Though corporate law had already been in place since before the time of Christ, it hugely expanded under Claudius. And as corporations became more powerful in their lobbying efforts, what we now call the Iron Triangle in Washington DC began to exhibit itself strongly in his reign. Laws began to be passed that favored the Roman collegia. The collegia were a cross between trade associations, trade unions, and corporations. So for example, in his Mises.org article, "The Ancient Suicide of the West," Nicholas Davidson said,

The shipping associations provide a striking case of this trend. At first the government offered concessions to shippers; little by little these merged into demands. For example, tax concessions granted to the shippers under Claudius (41-54) later provided a lever to bring them to heel under Hadrian (117-138).[24] The general trend was for the collegia to become instruments of state control."³

It was a kind of Fascism that was growing under Claudius, and resembles the enormous centralization we have been experiencing in my lifetime in America. So I think Claudius provides a great case study example of the kinds of dangers that can result from America's current economic experiments. So with that as a background, let's dig into the text.

I. Note that it is Jesus who gives a nation up to this judgment (v. 5a)

The first thing that verse 5 reminds us of is that Jesus is the one who unleashes this economic judgment. Verse 5 says, "And when He opened the third seal." The "He" refers back to Jesus. Jesus opens one seal after another.

³ Nicholas Davidson, "The Ancient Suicide of the West," <http://fee.org/articles/the-ancient-suicide-of-the-west/>

And even though it is His permission for demons to afflict, He still is sovereign over that. Just as He was sovereign over the militarism of verses 1-2 and the conflict and death of verses 3-4, he is sovereign over the economic woes of verses 5-6.

II. Note that good angels are involved in this judgment (v. 5b)

But angels are also involved in this judgment. Verse 5 says, "I heard the third living being saying, 'Come!'" It is a third cherubim angel who has now entered the conflict because a new demonic leader has entered the conflict. And I think both of them represent spiritual armies just as with the previous seals. So this angel summons the third commander to come forth from where he had been bound. Whether the third rider was bound in the pit or elsewhere, we don't know, but this third cherubim angel permits him to pass and to begin to inflict his specialty of problems upon that nation. So good angels are involved in some way in allowing economic judgments to come upon a nation.

III. Note that demons are interested in politics and economics (v. 5c)

And this demon comes forth gladly. Demons love to create havoc in a culture. And I want you to notice something - each demonic rider in this chapter has his own specialty. That's not unusual. The Bible speaks of demons specializing in all kinds of sins and diseases and destructions. Let me list a few of these specialties by quoting phrases from the Bible. The Bible speaks of a "spirit of jealousy" (Numb. 5:14), a "spirit of ill will" (Judges 9:23), a "spirit of deep sleep" (Is. 29:10), a "spirit of harlotry" (Hos. 4:12), "an unclean demon" (Luke 4:33), "a spirit of infirmity" (Luke 13:11), "a spirit of stupor" (Rom. 11:8), "a spirit of fear" (2 Tim. 1:7), a "spirit of error" (1 John 4:6), "deceiving spirits" (1 Tim. 4:1), and many others. In fact, the various names given to demons in the Old Testament speak of specialization as well. So we shouldn't be surprised that there are specialties among these four horsemen of the apocalypse.

The specialty of the demon in verses 1-2 was promoting imperialistic militarism. The specialty of the demon in verses 3-4 was promoting internal conflict and death. But the specialty of the demon in this verse has to do with overturning God's economic order and producing bad economic decisions - all in the name of justice.

And I bring this up because it is so easy to think of economics as being

neutral. It is not. It is either in submission to God's law or it is part of a demonic departure from God's law. Economics is really a subdivision of ethics. And America's Keynesian economics is immoral.

So when you think about politics, don't ignore the economics of the candidate. And honestly, demons don't care how societies depart from God's law, so long as God's law and His order are marred or destroyed. But make no mistake about it, demons are interested in the economics of a nation. They know how critically important the subject of economics is to liberty or bondage.

And let me illustrate. If you want to examine the demonic origins of Marxist Socialism you can read Karl Marx himself. What a messed up guy. He gave every evidence of being demon possessed. But Richard Wurmbrand's book, *Marx & Satan*, shows that he was a practicing Satanist.⁴ Or better yet, read Gary North's book, *Marx's Religion of Revolution*.⁵ And Marx's philosophy of economics has destroyed hundreds of millions of people in the last century. The success of that demonic rider no doubt brought great glee to Satan's kingdom. Marx certainly knew that economics is not neutral.

If you want to examine the demonic origins of Fascism, you can read Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, or read any number of biographies of either Hitler or Mussolini. It's origins are clearly demonic. In fact, this past week when I was doing research, I stumbled onto some of Mussolini's discussions. He was the Fascist leader of Italy, and a big fan of Hitler. In any case, in this book Mussolini talked about one of his meetings with Hitler and said, "He tried to make me believe he was mystically and scientifically convinced of being possessed not by a demon but by a spirit of a prehistoric Aryan mythology." So Mussolini said that Hitler claimed to be possessed by an ancient Aryan spirit. Mussolini went on to say, "In that moment I understood the strange, inexplicable sensation always produced in me by his speeches, which were characterized by a prophetic tone ..."⁶ And he went on to describe how Hitler said that he had learned from the occult sciences how to control his people. The roots of Fascism are demonic, just like Claudius' economics were demonically inspired.

If you want to see the demonic origins of Keynesianism (which America has followed for most of life), read *Baptized Inflation* by Ian Hodge.⁷ It's a good

4 Richard Wurmbrand, *Marx & Satan*, (Crossway Books, 1986).

5 Gary North, *Marx's Religion of Revolution*, (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1994).

6 As cited by Ray Moseley in *Mussolini: The Last 600 Days of Il Duce*, (Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), p. 211.

7 Ian Hodge, *Baptized Inflation*, (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1986).

critique. Mercantalism was demonic in origin. And what is unique to all of those unbiblical systems is that they rely upon the state to make the economy work. Demons love to push statism because statism is the biggest destroyer of liberty. And it wouldn't surprise me if the demon who specialized in Claudius' economics was the same demon who has been behind Mercantalism, Marxism, Fascism, and Keynesianism.

So point I, economic disaster is a judgment that Jesus sovereignly administers to bring a country to repentance for its lawlessness. Point II, good angels are interested in economics and they see the demonic economic systems that have been inflicted upon the world as being a judgment. We too should see things like Marxism and Keynesianism as a judgment. Point III, demons are enormously involved in economics - at least those who specialize in that subject. This demon was eager to do his work.

IV. Note that statist solutions to economic woes can look attractive - a black stallion and the pair of scales (v. 5d) - both were a promise of a conservative move to liberty and economic justice

But point IV, these anti-Christian economic systems are always made to look attractive. Verse 5 goes on to say, "And I looked and, behold, a black horse!" Who doesn't like a black horse? They are beautiful. "And he who sat on it had a pair of scales in his hand." That represents fairness. Who doesn't like fairness in economic dealings? We all do. Both of these were attractive symbols. They grab the heart. They communicate something compelling.

The black horse, though beautiful, was considered more conservative than the white horses of Augustus and Tiberius. The dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities points out that generals didn't dare to use white horses until Julius Caesar. He was the first one. And then Augustus and Tiberius both used white horses. But one author suggested that prior to Julius Caesar Roman generals didn't use them because those white horses were symbols of the god Apollo and went with the Caesar's claims to deity. Well, Claudius avoided all claims to deity and wanted to appear as conservative to the Senate as possible. Remember? He was trying to win their favor. He frequently made mention of the original Republic, which fit in with those conservative impulses. He talked about liberty and talked against the tyranny of his predecessors. So that is the black horse. It is a conservative symbol of a move to liberty and justice.

Likewise, the scales or balances represent government imposed fairness in

commerce. You might have been tempted to think that they represent justice in a *court*, but that is not the case. The Virtual Community for Teaching and Learning Classics says this about the multitude of coins that started with Claudius and continued with Vespasian and Titus:

The small, hand-held balance scales used by bankers and moneychangers became a potent symbol on Roman coins. In the modern world we are familiar with this type of scales as a legal symbol, usually carried by a female personification of Justice. In Rome, however, the symbolic value of these scales always retained a practical association with money and commerce. [That's an important point for interpretation, so let me read that again: "In the modern world we are familiar with this type of scales as a legal symbol, usually carried by a female personification of Justice. In Rome, however, the symbolic value of these scales always retained a practical association with money and commerce."] From the mid-first century CE emperors began minting coins ... [with this symbol;] to emphasize their guarantee of fairness and equity with regard to the entire Roman monetary system...⁸

So the black horse was a symbol of a pretended conservative move to liberty, and the scales are a promise that the government would be involved in the economy in order to produce fairness. And this has been the promise of every demonic government intervention in the free market. They are suspicious of a radical free market and believe that the civil government must intervene to protect the interest of the citizens. Of course, a stronger state was needed to accomplish this, and special subsidies and monopolistic privileges needed to be granted to groups that submitted to the state. But let me take a quick detour to explain how common this phenomenon has been.

The mercantilism of the 16th through 18th centuries held that all trade was a zero-sum game in which each side would try to cheat the other side in a ruthless competition. The idea was that somebody is going to get hurt in a free market exchange. So a free market was frowned upon as immoral. They let the public believe that if the marketplace was left alone, someone would get hurt. So Hobbes and other philosophers believed that the government needed to intervene. Thankfully scholars like Adam Smith, Dudley North, John Locke and others showed the irrationality of Mercantilism. But most people didn't bother studying whether political ideas were rational or not. They were more influenced by emotion and sound-bites. They believed the promises of a politician. And the Mercantilists gave a promise like this symbol of scales and the people clamored for economic justice - especially from competition from other countries. And the merchants loved it. They said, "We need imports to be more heavily taxed, we need protectionism, we

⁸ <http://www.vroma.org/~bmcmanus/aequitas.html>

need subsidies!"

Keynesianism was slightly different, but it still involved the state. Lord Maynard Keynes argued for what he called the "new mercantilism," agreeing that the state is really responsible to nurse the economy along with incentives. As he worded it, "the State will have to exercise a guiding influence on the propensity to consume partly through its scheme of taxation, partly by fixing the rate of interest, and partly, perhaps, in other ways."⁹ He argued that the decisions of the private sector tend to lead to inefficiencies, job loss, and even international tensions, and therefore, the state must oversee the economy and develop monetary policies to stabilize output over the business cycle. I won't get into all that is involved in his demonic theory that has dominated American politics in this last century, but I do want to emphasize that it too promised economic justice through government manipulation of the economy. It promise to fix unemployment. On page 350 of his book he even promised to fix international tensions by fixing the economy of each country and by providing jobs.¹⁰ But really, it is just another clever version of the state as savior.

Socialism and Fascism did the same. Japan's version of Mercantalism did the same. These demonic philosophies never advertise the inevitable growth of the state that results. They never advertise the economic dislocations that result, or inflation, or shortages. They never advertise how larger corporations suppress the competition by asking the government to add new regulations. The books only promise black horses of liberty and banking scales of economic justice. But they are promises that do not deliver. And they come straight from the pit of hell. Watch out for this third Horseman of the Apocalypse. He is disguised as good, but he is evil through and through.

9 John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, (New Delhi, India: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2008), p. 346.

10 Keynes said, > But if nations can learn to provide themselves with full employment by their domestic policy (and, we must add, if they can also attain equilibrium in the trend of their population), there need be no important economic forces calculated to set the interest of one country against that of its neighbours. There would still be room for the international division of labour and for international lending in appropriate conditions. But there would no longer be a pressing motive why one country need force its wares on another or repulse the offerings of its neighbour, not because this was necessary to enable it to pay for what it wished to purchase, but with the express object of upsetting the equilibrium of payments so as to develop a balance of trade in its own favour. International trade would cease to be what it is, namely, a desperate expedient to maintain employment at home by forcing sales on foreign markets and restricting purchases, which, if successful, will merely shift the problem of unemployment to the neighbour which is worsted in the struggle, but a willing and unimpeded exchange of goods and services in conditions of mutual advantage. > John Maynard Keynes, *General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*, (New Delhi, India: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2008), p. 350.

V. The results of statist control of the economy (v. 6)

A. *These negative results are overseen by providence (Adam Smith's "invisible Hand" - see verse 6a)*

Verse 6 hints at the results of all statist attempts to control an economy. It doesn't list every bad result that could happen, but it does mention results that would have been fresh in the minds of readers just from the policies of Claudius. And actually, you don't have to look further than the New Testament to see this illustrated. But let's look first at the source of all economic judgments. Verse 6 says, "And I heard a voice in the midst of the four living beings saying," and then comes a judgment.

You will remember that the living beings were involved in God's rule of providence. And this voice from the midst of the four living creatures seems to indicate that it wasn't their voice. They are the throne, and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in the midst of the throne. So this may well be the voice of God Himself. But whether that is true or not, since the throne, composed of these living creatures, represents God's providence, it is God's providence that guarantees the economic judgments. They are invariable laws that are just as sure as the laws of physics. And by the way, don't just think of the laws of economics as impersonal laws. Just as *God* makes gravity work, *God* makes the laws of economics work.

Adam Smith spoke of these laws of economics as being enforced by an "invisible Hand." I prefer to be more explicit and speak of God's providence rather than simply an invisible hand. But either way, the negative feedback from breaking God's economic laws (as Claudius was doing with the black horse and the scales) is just as real as the negative feedback of breaking God's laws of gravity. And we need to be convinced of that. It doesn't matter if your theory says you will float when you jump off a cliff, God's laws say that you will go splat at the bottom of the cliff. It doesn't matter if your statist theory of economics says that having a minimum wage will benefit the poor, the providence of God guarantees that having a minimum wage at all will raise unemployment and every time you raise the minimum wage it will continue to increase the unemployment. It's just the way God's economic laws work. You can't mess with God's laws of economics and get away with it. Claudius may well have been sincere in his failed attempts to rescue the economy of Rome, but when he broke the laws of God in economics, bad things happened. God guaranteed it, just like God guarantees negative feedback in America's economic policies of black horse and scales.

B. The mis-allocation of scarce resources (v. 6b), which almost always hurt the poor (v. 6c) and benefit the rich (v. 6d)

Well, verse 6 goes on to show two examples of economic mis-allocation. In your outline I say that they always hurt the poor and benefit the rich, and I will explain that in a moment. But let's read the verse. Verse 6 goes on to say, "A 'quart' of wheat for a denarius and three 'quarts' of barley for a denarius; but do not harm the olive oil and the wine." The fact that wheat and barley are hurt but wine and oil are not hurt at all shows that this is not a natural famine; this is a man-made famine. It's an artificial shortage. And I will explain why it happened.

A denarius was a day's wages for the average worker. You can see that in Matthew 20:2. And Herodotus (see 7.187) says that a quart of wheat was a daily ration of food for a grown man. So this means that the working class were spending their entire salary just for the breadwinner to be able eat, and if he ate wheat, there would be nothing left for his family. Just by way of comparison, the Roman writer, Cicero, said that normally a denarius would buy twelve quarts of wheat.¹¹ Barley was the poor man's food, and it was three times cheaper, but even with Barley, a working man didn't have enough to feed his entire family. It was almost a starvation allotment.

So Leon Morris interprets this language to mean, "The necessities of life for the poor will be in short supply, while the luxuries of the rich will not cease."¹² Why didn't they cease? Because the government didn't regulate those luxuries. There was too much push back from the powerful. Yeatts doesn't understand economics, but his commentary at least gets the gist of what is happening. He doesn't understand the "why," but he does get the "what.". He says,

As is often the case in times of famine, the luxuries of the rich are available, but the necessities of the poor are in short supply. The prosperity of the Roman Empire during the Flavian period brought conflict between the rich merchants and the heavily taxed poor (Thompson, 1990:17; Pilgrim, 1999:158–59). Smith notes: "In every economy and also in our own some people amass obscene fortunes while others can barely eke out a living" (2000:28). The sense of the passage seems to be that, in times of scarcity, the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.¹³

Now I don't agree with his statements that fortunes need to be obscene. God does not disparage the fortunes of Job or Abraham. But what was happening

¹¹ See his Oration Against Verres, 3.81.

¹² Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries.*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 106.

¹³ John R. Yeatts, *Revelation, Believers Church Bible Commentary*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 127.

to make the rich merchants rich at the expense of the poor was government intervention to control the economy. And it was actually done on behalf of the poor. And several histories show how the merchant corporations had become powerful enough to pass laws in the Senate and to manipulate Claudius' bureaus and agencies to regulate the industry in their favor. In fact, some of the heads of these corporations and some of the heads of the government agencies became incredibly rich. People sometimes wonder how it is that some Senators and Congressmen go into office as thousandaires, and emerge as millionaires. Well, all economic systems that utilize the state give the same opportunities for the powerful to enrich themselves at the expense of the public.

Since our verse talks about the price of wheat and barley, let me talk about the misallocations that resulted from the actions of the *scrinia* (which was the a Roman word for bureau) for the administration of grain. It was sort of like our Department of Agriculture, but didn't oversee wine and oil - it only oversaw the purchase, subsidization, and distribution of grains. Well, if you know anything of Austrian Economics, you already have a clue as to why the prices of oil and wine were fine (we're completely untouched by this rider) and the prices of wheat and barley were outrageous - government intervention always makes for dislocations in the marketplace resulting in either gluts or shortages. And the government was not intervening in or controlling the market for wine and oil.

Trying to benefit the poor, Claudius doled out wheat to the poor every day, and the number of welfarees kept climbing. But this increase in wheat consumption in Rome created a shortage in other parts of the empire. So to solve that problem Claudius tried to incentivize the growing and shipping of wheat. For starters, he paid shippers special incentives to become wheat shippers instead of shippers of other commodities. That impacted prices in other areas of life, which we won't get into. But Claudius was trying to make wheat cheaper in Rome. But the huge subsidies made dislocations of grain to other parts of the empire. Robert Scheuttinger comments that "Rome was to be perpetually plagued with this problem of artificially low prices for grain, which caused economic dislocations of all sorts."¹⁴ But the artificially low prices were only the beginning of the cycle. We are not yet to where this verse describes the famine.

There were numerous attempts to fix these economic dislocations. Claudius was a good administrator, but not a very good economist. His fixes always exacerbated the problem. One of his fixes was to make transportation of

¹⁴ <https://mises.org/library/price-fixing-ancient-rome>

wheat to Rome easier. That seems like a logical step to take. It was extremely expensive to bring wheat to Rome overland. You see, the problem was that the closest non-silted sea port to Rome was Puteoli, 138 miles away, which made for a long and laborious haul for wheat, which automatically added to the cost, despite subsidies.

So to solve that problem, Claudius fulfilled a dream that each emperor had had going back to Julius Caesar, and that was to make the local port, Ostia, once again navigable for big ships. It had filled up with silt. Well, this required dredging a basin of some 200 acres, the construction of concrete breakwaters, imperial administrative offices, commercial firms, banks, and other buildings to accommodate the new influx of business. And that required bringing in tens of thousands of more workers. He had already hired 30,000 workmen for just one of his improvement projects - draining the Fucine Lake in order to prevent floods and to make more arable land where wheat could be grown. That project was a disaster. Anyway, what one study describes as his vast welfare and public works programs¹⁵ took hundreds of thousands of employees away from farms and other industries, with predictable results - more shortages in more areas, including wheat growers. Why wouldn't you go to work for Claudius when he paid you better than if you stayed on the farm? So this exacerbated the wheat shortage.

Fritz Heichelheim and Cedric Yeo point out more complications that came from opening up the harbor of Ostia. It seemed like such a good a idea. But they say,

The development of the port of Ostia raised economic problems both difficult and unforeseen. Ships using the port had to leave empty. Rome was a consumer of the world's products, not a producer. Her exports were insignificant, her imports immense -- grain, fruits, fish, meats, hides, oil and wine; minerals of every sort, marble, lumber, glass, paper, dyes, clothing, jewelry; spices, ointments, and perfumes. No sooner had Claudius diverted shipping from Puteoli (the outlet of a rich exporting region of both agricultural and industrial products) than the shipowners complained of losing money because of the lack of return cargoes. To satisfy them and keep vital supplies moving into Rome, Claudius and his successors had to compensate them with special concessions, such as insurance against shipwreck, tax exemptions, the waiving of the succession law, and the grant of citizenship to those engaged for six years in the grain carrying service.¹⁶

Can you see how there is nothing new under the sun? President Franklin Roosevelt imitated a lot of what Claudius did. Now, I don't have time to get into how ship builders faked shipping grain in order to get more of the

¹⁵ <https://mises.org/library/price-fixing-ancient-rome>

¹⁶ Heichelheim and Yeo, *Ibid.*, p. 320.

government subsidies, and how this led to hiring even more federal employees in order to ferret out cheating,¹⁷ and led to several of Claudius' administrators becoming wealthier than Crassus, the wealthiest Roman of the past. Those Department heads got that wealth because of kickbacks from merchants. And each of these government complications in turn led to even further dislocations in the economy.

So you can see that Claudius would make a great case study in what is wrong with modern America. But I think I have given enough information to explain why the New Testament says that there was a huge famine (or shortage of food) around the entire empire, and also explains why it did not impact wine and oil. Wine and oil were not yet under government oversight; grain was. Anytime you have government intrusion into some part of the marketplace, it is going to spoil it.

But here is the problem - when citizens see the state as savior, they don't have anywhere else to go. They may not have liked Claudius, but with each new complication in the economy, the people demanded more government to fix the problems that the civil government had created in the first place. So there was constant growth of government with each horse rider until Nero becomes unbearable.

When citizens cry for the government to fix everything in life, you know that we are under judgment. It's an economic judgment because God's economic laws are being ignored by both citizens and rulers alike. If there is one thing that this passage should scare us away from, it should scare us away from a ruler who promises a black horse of conservatism and the scales of economic justice. We don't want the government's economic justice. We want the government to leave the free market alone. That's what Biblical economics calls for.

Conclusion

Let me end with two more observations. First, Rushdoony is absolutely correct in his commentary when he says that government controls and inflation "are twin measures which are basic to economic hardship."¹⁸ It is not until Nero that the emperors begin to experiment with debasing currency and its resulting inflation. But the "wise" control of the economy started with Claudius. Here's the thing - the "wise" administration of a successful businessman or administrator is not what is needed for president. Now, I'm

¹⁷ For a particularly interesting description of the potential for cheating, see Peter Temin, *The Roman Market Economy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), p. 105.

¹⁸ R. J. Rushdoony, *Thy Kingdom Come*, (Fairfax, VA: Thoburn Press, 1978), p. 144.

not even convinced that Trump is a good businessman, but even if he were, that is not what is needed for president. We don't need a president who can run the country like a business. That's a recipe for disaster. Claudius was a fantastic administrator, but a lousy president. And massive famine and other economic dislocations happened around the empire as a result of Claudius being such a skilled administrator. Brothers and sisters, teach your children Biblical economics; teach them Biblical civics. It's because the church at large doesn't understand these principles that our country is in the mess that it is. And if you want one fun book that can teach both, get David Chilton's book, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators*.

The last application that I want to make is that God wants the church to survive these kinds of disasters. It's one of the reasons He warns us about them. But it is also one of the reasons why God calls us to increase our deacons fund. It's the church ministering to the church during times of crisis. Turn to Acts 11, and I want to read you three verses that describe the man-induced famine that occurred under the administration of Claudius Caesar. Acts 11:27-30.

Acts 11:27 And in these days prophets came from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 Then one of them, named Agabus, stood up and showed by the Spirit that there was going to be a great famine throughout all the world, which also happened in the days of Claudius Caesar. 29 Then the disciples, each according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea. 30 This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.

Notice two things. God had warned the church. He wants us to be prepared ahead of time. He cares for us, and He has given us principles by which we can anticipate disaster and prepare for it.

Second, God calls the church to help each other through difficult crises. A great deal of Paul's epistles was devoted to helping the church to figure out how to deal with calamities like famine. They come upon many people unexpectedly, but if we understand God's laws of economics, we will understand that our modern insane economic system is guaranteed to eventually create major problems. It's inevitable. We don't need to be taken by surprise. And Christians who are wise will start now, while they can, to prepare for it. May we as a church be effective in doing so. Amen.