



The decline of the Roman Empire created great upheaval throughout the known world. Historians offer various reasons for the eventual decline, but the consensus seems to be that there is no single cause. Rather, there occurred many contributing factors spanning centuries, from the initial invasions by barbarians in the third century to the deposing of the last Western Roman Emperor, Romulus Augustus, by the Germanic mercenary Odoacer in A.D. 476.

When historians speak of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire they are referring specifically to the Western Roman Empire. The Eastern Roman Empire continued for another thousand years until conquered by the Ottomans. The reason for the focus on the Western Roman Empire isn't so much because the Empire's influence remained strong as long as it lasted, but because it gave way to what would become in later centuries the Holy Roman Empire—a melding of a restored Western Roman Empire under German rule with the emerging power of the Roman Catholic Church.

The western region of the Roman Empire had already in the fourth century suffered the loss of its influence when Constantine moved the empire's seat of power from Rome to Byzantium in Greece, and renamed the latter Constantinople. The Eastern Roman Empire's seat of power was initially in Nicomedia, Turkey, but also moved to Constantinople.

With the decay of the Western Roman Empire which was fragmented into several smaller kingdoms, the Eastern Roman or Byzantine Empire flourished, becoming one of the most powerful forces in Europe despite numerous setbacks through military conflicts.

With the collapse of the Western Roman Empire came the end of what historians call Classical Antiquity—a long period of cultural progress achieved through a hybrid Greek-Roman civilization known as the Greco-Roman world which began in the latter part of the 8th century B.C. Thus began a cultural

decline into what is commonly called “The Middle Ages,” AKA “The Dark Ages.”

Early on during the Middle Ages, in the 6th century the Germanic barbarian invaders formed numerous kingdoms throughout the former Western Roman Empire, entrenching their pagan elements into the nominally Christian (albeit paganized “Christian”) environs. These Germanic kingdoms competed among themselves for the land, with the eventual dominance by the Franks who attained a sizeable portion of the disputed territories within what would become modern France and Germany.

The Eastern Roman Empire continued to expand under Justinian who overthrew the Vandals in North Africa. Justinian sought to regain Italy as well, with a plan to reestablish control over the territories of the defunct Western Roman Empire. With his death, most of what he had accomplished was lost.

The 6th Century

The 6th century saw monasticism grow in response to the secularization of the Roman church. In 529, Benedict of Nursia established the Benedictine Order of monks at Monte Cassino. His “Rule” for monks became the most influential among most monastics over the centuries.

Although anti-Christ was well-served by monasticism because of its ascetic traditions and removal from society, several monastic orders involved themselves in the copying and translating of the Scriptures. These were strictly for the hierarchical system which for centuries withheld them from the common people. But were it not for these copyists and translators the Scriptures might well have remained obscure and rare even today. As it turns out, the avariciousness of the Roman Catholic Church was used by God to preserve His Word in a way that could not have been accomplished by the rightful, autonomous assemblies scattered throughout the known world.

At the same time, the churches began to develop a pattern of intercession which interposed a hierarchy of saints to whom Christians began to pray in seeking favors from God. This hierarchy continues to the present day among Roman Catholics and many Orthodox churches.

At the top of the hierarchy is the Trinity with Christ as the most favorable because of His human as well as divine natures and His experiences in the flesh. Following Christ is Mary, believed to be a “perpetual virgin,” who, as a woman, is believed to be more sensitive and receptive to the needs of believers. Following upon Christ and Mary are various saints, many of whom are considered “patron saints” to whom prayers for specific petitions might be made. The root of this hierarchy of intercession is found in Roman pagan tradition that had numerous gods to whom the ancient Romans prayed for specific needs.

In this way, anti-Christ interposed dead men and women between the believer and the Father, contrary to Jesus’ words in John 16:23-26:

“And in that day you will ask nothing of Me. Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name, He will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name; ask, and you shall receive, so that your joy may be full.

“I have said these things to you in allegories, but the time comes when I will no longer speak to you in allegories, but I will speak to you plainly concerning the Father. In that day you shall ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father for you, because the Father Himself loves you because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came out from God.

In addition to looking to alleged “saints” for intercession, there developed among Christians the idea that touching or at least looking upon relics of the faith was somehow important. Close proximity to things holy would result in pilgrimages being made to sites where Christ or some perceived saint was believed to have walked.

This has effectively hindered greatly the relationship between believers and the Father, which relationship Jesus came to establish as essential to sanctification and obedience to His will.

In place of that personal relationship with the Father, the Roman Catholic Church turned to fleshly attempts to impose what it thought to be the will of God upon society. In 529, Emperor Justinian issued his Code of Civil Laws which reflected Christian moral values, and upon which our modern jurisprudence is based. This was the basis for the biblical ethic upon which Western Civilization flourished for the past fifteen hundred years.

While we in the West can appreciate the blessings that have come upon us as a result of that ethic’s influence, we must not make the mistake of thinking that a moral society in itself is glorifying to God, or that it can be imposed upon unregenerate (or even regenerate) people without resorting to ungodly means. This was proven throughout the Dark Ages as Roman

Catholicism sought to force conversion to Christianity through coercion and pressure, including torture. Such persecution is a major reason why the Middle Ages are also called the Dark Ages.

In 530, the first pope of Germanic ancestry, Boniface II, came to power as the church and state became more intermingled. As church buildings became larger and more lavish, Justinian built Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, which he dedicated to Christ as the “Holy Wisdom.”

The purity and simplicity of faith in Jesus Christ had long been discarded under the burgeoning papal-imperial coalition. Anti-Christ had succeeded in largely relegating Christianity to a system of legalisms and worldly-wise commerce. He also influenced the church hierarchy in its attempts to make converts from among the barbarians in Europe. The Roman Catholic Church began to accept much pagan tradition and spirituality as a means to placate its new converts. Sorcery, pagan religious holidays and traditions, and other pagan practices began to be melded into a hybrid Christian-pagan Christianity beyond that which was born in Rome.

Toward the end of the century, Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) formulated the Roman Catholic Mass into much of what it is today.

On April 26, 570, there was born to a family of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca a man whose presence would greatly impact both the east and west. Born Abu al-Qasim Muhammad ibn ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abd al-Muttlib ibn Hashim, he would come to be known simply as Muhammad. Orphaned at an early age, Muhammad was brought up by his uncle Abu Talib, and became a merchant. He married at the age of 25 but became discontented with his life. According to Islamic tradition, at the age of 40 Muhammad retreated to a cave near Mecca during the month of Ramadan where he allegedly received his first revelation from God. Three years later he began preaching these revelations, proclaiming that “God is One,” and that the only way to God is complete surrender (*islam*) to him. He also proclaimed himself a prophet in the same manner of Moses and Jesus.

The 7th Century

The 7th century was largely dominated by the rise of Islam in the east, beginning with Muhammad’s migration from Mecca to Medina where he found acceptance as a “community activist,” for lack of a better term.

Because his proclamations were initially met with hostility by his fellow Meccans who maintained religious devotion to numerous pagan gods, Muhammad left Mecca with a small band of followers and moved to the city of Medina. There he rose to prominence and united the tribes under the Constitution of Medina which formulated an agreement to end the bitter fighting between two clans within Medina, the Aws and Khazraj. Drawing up certain rights and responsibilities for his followers (who came to be called “Muslims”) and other pagan communities of Medina, including Christians and Jews, he brought the community into unity.

Over a period of some eight years Muhammad developed a following that grew to number around 10,000. With them he embarked upon a course of conquest by raiding caravans,

murdering innocents, including women and children, and imposing Islam upon those he conquered. As Christians and Jews increasingly refused to accept Islam, Muhammad changed his original tone of benevolence toward them into a hateful pogrom to either eliminate or enslave any Jew or Christian with whom he came in contact.

Muhammad instituted the lunar-based Islamic calendar which governs Islamic countries. Some Islamic countries use the Islamic calendar for religious purposes but the Gregorian calendar for civil purposes in order to keep pace with the rest of the world's commerce and political interaction. The first year of the Islamic calendar traces to the year Muhammad allegedly made his supernatural journey from Mecca to Medina (A.D. 622), known as the Hijra. Every year since then has been designated by Islam as either H for Hijra or A.H. for the Latin *anno Hegirae* (in the year of the Hijra). Thus, Muslims typically call their calendar the Hijri calendar.¹

Interestingly, there is no history of Muhammad's existence prior to the emergence of the Qur'an which alleges to have been written by Muhammad. The earliest biography of Muhammad is Ibn Ishaq's *Life of God's Messenger* written ca. 767 (150 A.H.). The original no longer exists, but has been referred to by other Muslim writers, allegedly quoted verbatim at great length by Ibn Hisham and Al-Tabari. Another early source is the history of Muhammad's campaigns by al-Waqidi, but it, too, was written almost two hundred years after Muhammad was said to have died (A.D. 632).

Did Muhammad actually exist? Or was he the figment of a religious zealot's imagination? Until proven otherwise, we will assume that he did live, but that no history contemporary to his life exists. The alleged histories of his life relate some fantastic supernatural events which clearly never occurred. (I have a book that was given to me, which alleges that Muhammad never really existed, but I've not had time to read it as yet. Still, the idea that he may in reality be a fictional character is intriguing.)

In the 630s Arab Muslims wrested from Byzantium control the latter's southern provinces including Egypt and Syria. Throughout the rest of the 7th century, Islam under the Umayyad caliphs would besiege Byzantium, twice threatening to capture its capital Constantinople. By 640—the year of Muhammad's death—the Arabs had taken control of Mesopotamia and Islam's military expansion grew rapidly as the Umayyads, based in Egypt, conquered the remnant of the Persian Empire. The expanding Muslim empire soon engulfed Armenia, Cyprus and Iran and

began expeditions into North Africa where it would ultimately gain total control from Egypt to Mauritania.

Islam's attention turned toward Jerusalem in the first year A.H. (A.D. 622) when Muslims were instructed to face in the direction of the city when prostrating themselves in prayer. This is the year Muslim tradition says Muhammad made his night journey and ascension to Heaven. This alleged night journey became a vital doctrinal basis for much of Islam's beliefs and practices.² Over a year later the direction to face was changed to Mecca.

In 637 the Arab Rashidun Caliphs defeated the Byzantines at the Battle of Yarmouk and took control of Palestine, including Jerusalem, driving the Jews out of the city. The Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab allowed the Jews back into Jerusalem and signed a treaty promising to protect the Christians and their holy places. In 688 construction on the Dome of the Rock, the second most sacred shrine in Islam, was begun under the Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik. It was built on the site where Muslim tradition says Muhammad ascended into heaven during his Night Journey, and where Jews believe Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac. It was completed in 691 and has been refurbished several times since then.

The Dome of the Rock fits perfectly the prophecy in Daniel which speaks of a coming king who will conquer Jerusalem:

“And the king shall do according to his will; and he will exalt himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvelous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper until the indignation is accomplished, for that which is determined shall be done.”

Neither shall he regard the god [*elohiym*: “gods”] of his fathers, nor the desire of women, nor regard any god, for he shall magnify himself above all. But in his estate he will honor the god of forces, and he will honor a god whom his fathers did not know with gold, and silver, and with precious stones, and pleasant things.

“He will do this in the most strongholds with a strange god whom he shall acknowledge and increase with glory. And he shall cause them to rule over many, and will divide the land for gain.

“And at the time of the end the king of the south [Egypt] will push at him, and the king of the north [Syria] shall come against him like a whirlwind—with chariots, and with horsemen, and with many ships—and he will enter into the countries, and will overflow and pass over.

¹ I believe Muhammad is the primary representative of the last-days “prince” or “king” among spiritual principalities whose final representative will be the coming anti-Christ according to Daniel 7. When Daniel speaks of princes and kings rising in the future he is not speaking merely of the men involved, but of spiritual entities that rule over the affairs of men. This final prince will “speak great words against the most High and will wear out the saints of the most High, and will think to change times and laws, and they will be given into his hand until a time, and times, and the dividing of time” (three-and-one-half years).

Under the prince of the final world power, Muhammad and Islam have sought to change the calendar and to impose Islamic law throughout the Holy Land, and have largely succeeded. His followers have built his tabernacle (the Dome of the Rock) on the holy mountain (Zion) between the Great Sea (the Mediterranean) and the inland sea (the Dead Sea) (Dan 11:45).

This is another reason to believe the last-days anti-Christ will be a Muslim who will negotiate a confederacy with the West under the papacy to share Jerusalem and drive the Jews into the wilderness for three-and-one-half years (Rv 12:14).

² The first part of the story—the **Isra** myth—begins with Muhammad praying in the Kaaba in Mecca. He claimed to have been visited by the archangel Jibril (Gabriel) who brought to him a steed named Buraq, the traditional heavenly steed of the prophets. Muhammad rides Buraq to the Masjid Al Aqsa—the “Farthest Mosque,” believed by some Muslims to be the Al-Aqsa Mosque (where today sits the Dome of the Rock) in Jerusalem. There Muhammad leads other prophets, including Adam, Moses and Jesus in prayer. In the second part of the journey—the **Mi'raj** (Arabic for “ladder”), Buraq takes him to the heavens, where he tours the seven circles and speaks with the earlier prophets such as Abraham, Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus. Muhammad is then taken to Sidrat al-Muntaha—a holy tree in the seventh heaven that Gabriel is not allowed to pass. According to Islamic tradition, God instructs Muhammad that his followers (Muslims) must pray fifty times per day. Moses tells Muhammad that it is very difficult for the people and urges Muhammad to ask God to reduce the number to which God agrees to set at five times per day.

“He will also enter into the glorious land, and many countries will be overthrown, but these will escape out of his hand: Edom, and Moab, and the chief of the children of Ammon [present-day Jordan]. He will stretch forth his hand also upon the countries, and the land of Egypt shall not escape. But he shall have power over the treasures of gold and of silver, and over all the precious things of Egypt, and the Libyans and the Ethiopians shall be at his steps.

“But news out of the east and out of the north will trouble him. Therefore he will go forth with great fury to destroy, and to utterly slay many. And he will plant the tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain [Zion]. Yet he shall come to his end, and no one shall help him.” (Da 11:36-45)

The “king” is the spiritual principality of this empire, embodied in the religion of Islam. The Ottoman Empire at one time advanced as far as France, and had a strong foothold in Spain until driven out. It was an empire characterized by great accomplishments in art, architecture, science and mathematics (primarily by using the genius of the captured nations). Islam’s holy sites are decorated with great splendor and wealth.

Today the Ottoman Empire has ceased to exist officially, but its Islamic influences remain. Jerusalem was taken by the Ottomans and remained in Muslim possession until the six-day war of 1967 when the modern state of Israel took control of the city. Today, one of Islam’s most holy sites—the “tabernacle” called the Dome of the Rock—sits upon the ancient temple mount (Zion), which is between the Mediterranean Sea and the Dead Sea. Caliph Abd al-Malik did indeed “plant the tabernacles of his palace between the seas in the glorious holy mountain.”

It is also believed that the Dome of the Rock sits directly over the ruins of the ancient Jewish temple, and specifically over the site of the Holy of Holies. Some dispute this, but there is no solid evidence for either position. It would seem, however, that the Lord purposely allowed this to happen in order to prevent the Jews from building a temple because there is no acceptable sacrifice for sin after Jesus offered the perfect sacrifice. He alone will build the next temple during the Millennium.

Over the centuries, anti-Christ’s most formidable weapon against true believers in Christ, as well as Jews, would combine the Roman Catholic Church in the West, and Islam in the East and in North Africa.

The 8th Century

Within one hundred years Islam would become a mighty empire in its own right, threatening conquest of Western Europe after having conquered the Middle East, North Africa, Southern Italy, and making inroads as far west as Spain. Except for the Catholic Church and its political and military strength, including the not-so-Holy Crusaders, Islam today would be in control of much of Western Europe. But its time for world dominance had not yet come, and the Lord used one ungodly world power against the other to keep it in check for the time being.

The quelling of the Muslim advance is attributable in large part to the famous Battle of Tours (Poitiers) in 732, in which the leader of the Franks, Charles Martel, defeated a large army of Moors led by ‘Abdul Rahman Al Ghafiqi, the governor of Cordoba, Spain. That epic battle established a balance of power between Western Europe, Islam and the Byzantine Empire. Christianity was preserved as the dominant religion in both Western and Eastern Europe.

The battle also laid the foundation for the Carolingian Empire in the early 9th century and established Frankish domination over Western Europe for the next one hundred years. Thus, anti-Christ’s design to stamp out even the corrupted version of faith in Christ was thwarted. And as imperfect as Christianity had become, there remained faithful brethren who survived both the corrupting of the faith and anti-Christ’s attempt to destroy it utterly.

The prince of Rome (represented by the pope) would not make way for the prince of Arabia (represented by Muhammad). For the remainder of time the two would co-exist as world powers which I believe will one day in the future unite into an uneasy alliance to form the domain of the anti-Christ.

There also arose in the late 8th century, conflict between east and west Europe when the Bulgarians waged campaigns against the Byzantines, ultimately overcoming Constantine VI’s forces at the Battle of Marcellae, forcing him to pay tribute to the Khans who ruled Bulgaria.

In the east, motivated by the prohibition of “graven images” in the Tanach, there arose a movement in Byzantium to destroy all religious icons in the churches. Byzantine Iconoclasm banned religious images, and instituted widespread destruction of images as well as persecution of those who venerated them. The “First Iconoclasm” lasted for 57 years from 730 to 787, then abated for a time until iconoclasm was revived in the “Second Iconoclasm” between 814 and 842.

A number of reasons for the rise of iconoclasm in Byzantium include the influence of Islamic culture which forbids the use of images. Iconoclasm also reflected social and class distinctions wherein the poorer non-Greek citizens of the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire who faced constant raids by Muslims saw the advantage in destroying their icons. The wealthier Greeks within the Balkan and Italian provinces, as well as in Constantinople, strongly opposed iconoclasm.

In the west the papacy maintained hierarchical dominance over the churches in both the east and the west, but had no political power until Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne, king of the Franks, as Emperor of the Romans in A.D. 800 to begin the Carolingian dynasty, and to close out the century. Thus the Western Roman Empire was revived, though not to its former glory, to last for another thousand years.

The 9th Century

In 805 there began more conflicts between Islam and the Byzantines with successes and defeats on both sides, but with no total conquest for either.

The coronation of Charlemagne as the first Holy Roman emperor began the Carolingian empire named after him. He

died of pleurisy on January 28, 814, at age 71. He was embalmed and buried sitting upright on a gold-and-ivory throne, holding a gold scepter, shield and sword. His son Lothair would succeed him as Holy Roman Emperor as Louis I (the Pious), and would continue the Carolingian dynasty which would last until the death of Charles the Fat in 888.

Louis I divided the realm among his three sons from his first marriage: Lothair was named co-emperor and king of Italy; Pepin was made king of Aquitaine; Louis the German was made king of Bavaria. These were the precursors of modern Italy, France and Germany, and the struggle for power among Louis and his sons is filled with treachery and intrigue that laid the groundwork for centuries of antagonism among those three nations. The final division of the empire came with the Treaty of Verdun in 843. Lothair's kingdom would be further divided among his sons upon his death in 855.

In 823, Pope Paschal I began the papal tradition of handing the imperial sword to succeeding emperors of the Holy Roman Empire with the coronation of Louis I's son Lothair as co-emperor. This practice symbolized the temporal power granted by the Church to the state as the guardian of virtue and protectorate of the Church.

During his reign, Pope Paschal I instituted numerous reforms upon the Church and secured independence of the Roman see and the pope's sovereignty over Church states.

In 867, there began a schism within the Roman Church with an encyclical against Pope Nicholas I from Photius, the patriarch of Constantinople. The schism would grow to finally result in a split between east and west in 1054, which split remains today.

The 10th Century

Things continue much as before with anti-Christ fomenting wars among nations and schisms in the Roman Church, thus keeping true faith in Jesus Christ on a continual path of persecution from various factions at odds with one another: Islam; the Roman Catholic Church; barbarian invaders.

In 904, Pope Christophorus was deposed and strangled to death on orders from a cleric who succeeded him with the support of Alberic I of Spoleto. The cleric was consecrated on January 29 as Sergius III, who also had Christophorus's predecessor Leo V assassinated. Sergius III is rumored to have fathered a son by Marozia, the teenaged daughter of the papal dictator Theophylactus. This can be only a "rumor" because priestly celibacy had been imposed upon the church's clergy since the fourth century.

So much for the Roman Church's claim that the popes are chosen by the Holy Spirit as successors to Peter, the alleged first "pope" of the Roman Catholic Church.

Islam continued its incursion into the West and solidified its hold on Jerusalem.

The 11th Century

Although the Islamic rulers were at times benevolent, and at times harsh, Christians and Jews managed to survive in Palestine. But as time wore on the Roman Church began to show interest in taking back control of Jerusalem, partly because of the rising persecution of Christians pilgriming to the church's holy sites.

In 1009, the church's interest increased when the Fatimid Caliph al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah ordered the destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, deemed holy to Catholics because it was constructed on the site where the church believed Christ was buried and rose again. Because the Muslims realized that to antagonize Christians was seriously hampering its trade with pilgrims, the church was rebuilt, and the persecution of pilgrims abated, eventually to stop. But the church had already begun to react to the violence against Christians and was garnering support for Crusades that would spread across the Christian world.

The groundwork for the Crusades had been laid earlier in the Middle Ages when in 711 the Muslim commander Tariq ibn Ziyad began his invasion of Gaul. Turkish Muslim attacks further weakened the Byzantine Empire. As Islam continued to spread throughout the Holy Roman Empire the Catholic Church became convinced it had to do something to stop its advance.

In 1063, Pope Alexander II blessed Iberian Christians in their wars against the Muslims, authorizing the use of a papal standard. He also granted indulgences to those killed in battle. In 1074, Byzantine Emperor Michael VII requested aid from Pope Gregory VII. Eventually Pope Gregory VII's successor Pope Urban II blessed Christian armies fighting to reclaim the lands lost to the Muslim invaders.

Crusaders were less soldiers of the empire than soldiers for the church. This was due in part to the Investiture Controversy which pitted the papacy against the nobles of the Holy Roman Empire for authority in granting appointments to ecclesiastical offices. This conflict originated around 1075 between Pope Gregory VII and Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV. In 1075, Pope Gregory VII issued a series of canons in which he asserted that secular law resides solely under the pope's authority because the Roman Catholic Church, being founded by God, is the sole universal power. Henry IV rebelled against Gregory's dictum by withdrawing imperial support of Gregory and calling for the election of a new pope. Gregory reacted by excommunicating Henry and deposing him as German king.

Eventually the pope won because of the German princes and aristocracy who had been in rebellion since 1075. Needing to muster strength against the rebellion, Henry IV recanted and apologized in person to the pope. The intrigue that followed involved several kings and popes, with the eventual succumbing of imperial power to the papacy which held sway over the populous of the empire through fear and spiritual sanctions.

Anti-Christ succeeded in placing secular power under the papacy which would last until the Reformation. The power of the sword in the hands of the pope would be used to terrorize both non-believers and those alleged by the papacy to be "heretics."