

Vespasian (70-79 AD): The Founder of a New Dynasty

Titus Flavius Vespasian was not like the emperors who ruled before him, all of whom were from the Julio-Claudian Dynasty. He was not a noble or descendant of Caesar Augustus. Instead, he was the son of an equestrian and was born in the Sabine hills--the countryside outside Rome. Vespasian was not an aristocrat, but his family was still wealthy, which allowed him to start a career in politics and enter the Roman Senate. A tough soldier and capable general, he soon built a reputation for his part in the conquest of Britain under Claudius and for his wise governance of the province of Africa in 63 AD.

In 66 AD the Jews living in the province of Judaea revolted against Roman rule. They expelled the Roman soldiers from Jerusalem and then ambushed and destroyed a Roman legion. Vespasian was a natural choice to lead the Roman armies against these rebels. So Emperor Nero appointed Vespasian and Vespasian's eldest son, Titus, to command over two legions and sent them to crush the revolt. Vespasian proved a successful general against the Jews, defeating the rebels at several major battles and taking many Jews as prisoners. One of these prisoners, Josephus, became an ally of Vespasian and Titus, and under the patronage of Vespasian he went on to write a history of the Jewish people in Greek, for which Josephus would be remembered as one of the greatest historians of antiquity.

While Vespasian was leading the war in Palestine, back in Rome Emperor Nero was assassinated in 68 AD and the empire descended into civil war over who would be the new emperor. The year 69 AD became known as the Year of Four Emperors because of the rapid succession of generals who used their armies to take control of the empire. Galba succeeded Nero but he was killed by Otho, who was soon defeated by Vitellius. Vespasian initially concentrated on his struggle against the Jewish rebels, but soon he was convinced to use his armies to stake a claim to the throne. The ancient sources say he was convinced to do this after a number of omens seemed to predict that he would become emperor, including a Jewish prophecy told to him by Josephus. Vespasian traveled to Egypt, leaving his son Titus in charge of finishing the war against the Jews. From Egypt Vespasian sent an army over the sea to Italy. Vespasian's force defeated Vitellius, though Vespasian's brother and close supporter, Sabinus, was killed in Rome, and the city was severely damaged by the fighting. Vitellius surrendered, but Vespasian's troops put him to death. Vespasian came to Rome in 70 AD and took over as the new emperor.

Vespasian's control of important armies allowed him to become emperor, and this was a turning point in the history of Rome. In the words of the Roman historian Tacitus (*Historiae*, 1.4), because Nero had been killed and the empire taken over by a military leader, "[it] now had been divulged that secret of the empire, that emperors could be made elsewhere than at Rome." Vespasian had been made emperor in the East, and then went on to conquer Rome and make himself its ruler. Indeed, though every emperor since Augustus was concerned about military leaders becoming too powerful and challenging their rule, now this threat became real. If Vespasian could take over the empire with his armies, anyone could. Emperors could trust their commanders even less, and the Roman Empire for the rest of its history would be plagued by the problem of civil war created by power-hungry generals.

Nonetheless, Vespasian's rule was fairly stable and prosperous. He recovered the financial situation of the empire, but he had to do this with very unpopular new taxes. The



most infamous was a urine tax on public toilets. Vespasian was a strong leader, and with the empire united under his rule, it prospered. But at the same time, Vespasian was a strict ruler. Besides the heavy new taxes, he had his enemies in the army and Senate exiled, or in a few rare cases put to death. Vespasian was known for his simple and plain way of living. This may have been exaggerated in his propaganda to distinguish him from the pleasure-loving and decadent Nero. Even the statues of Vespasian cast him as a balding and grizzled older man with a hardened face, as opposed to the statues of the Julio-Claudians who were depicted as always youthful, especially the soft and effeminate statues of Nero.

Vespasian certainly used propaganda to boost his image and to distance himself from Nero. Stories traveled that he had special powers, such as the ability to heal the sick. Vespasian also funded historians such as Josephus, Tacitus, and Pliny the Elder, ensuring that these writers were sympathetic to him and preserved a favorable impression of Vespasian for posterity. In addition, Vespasian used massive building projects to gain favor. He took land that had been used by Nero for personal palaces and turned them into buildings open to the Roman public. Under his rule, construction began on the Flavian Amphitheater, now known as the Coliseum, on the old site of Nero's Golden House, though Vespasian died before it was completed.

When Vespasian died in 79 AD, he had ruled the Roman Empire for nearly a decade. His family continued to rule the empire, and became known as the Flavian Dynasty. Though he may be remembered fondly because of his successful propaganda and patronage of the historians, it is undeniable that his reign saw a recovery of the Roman Empire after the troubled reign of Nero and a brutal civil war. However, Vespasian's reign ultimately revealed the first cracks in the Roman imperial system: that a successful general could make himself emperor. This would soon have disastrous effects for Rome in the future.

Lesson Summary:

- Vespasian came from a fairly humble background, but he became an accomplished general who led the Roman armies against the Jewish Revolt.
- He was proclaimed emperor in the Year of Four Emperors, and used his military resources to become the last man standing in the civil war.
- He was a strong and authoritative ruler, who used new taxes to recover the state finances and harsh punishment and political propaganda to keep his subjects in line.
- His reign was ultimately seen as a recovery from the decadent and disastrous rule of Nero.

