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*History of the Decline and Fall of  
the Roman Empire*

Gibbon

# Study Guide on Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Prefaces, Chapters 1–15

According to Gibbon, what were the causes of the greatness of the Roman Empire? Why does he identify the period between Domitian and Commodus as “the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous” (83<sup>1</sup>)? Consider:

- How did the Romans involve many people in the public good? For example, what was the relation between private and common good, and between conquered and conqueror? (See, for example, 49.)
- What part did Roman culture, language, and institutions play in the happiness of this period (40, 42, 44)?
- “[The Antonines’] united reigns are possibly the only period of history in which the happiness of a great people was the sole object of government” (82). How does Gibbon justify this claim? Is his argument persuasive?
- See also: “The vast extent of the Roman empire was governed by absolute power, under the guidance of virtue and wisdom” (83). What kind of wisdom, and what definition of virtue, does Gibbon intend here? Is this opposed to the thought or wisdom of the Christians?

What were the causes of *decline* in Roman felicity (62–64)? What internal changes brought about the decline, and what initiated those changes? As Gibbon sees it, what did this decline consist in, and what were its signs?

Examine the five “secondary” causes that Gibbon gives for the rise of Christianity (121ff.). For each cause, answer the following questions:

- Does Gibbon provide persuasive evidence that this characteristic was found in the early Christian church?
- Does he argue persuasively that this characteristic was a principal cause for the spread of Christianity?
- How does each characteristic of the Christians compare with the corresponding trait or attitude among the Romans? (For example, what pagan attitude was opposed to the “intolerant zeal of the Christians” [122] and what morality to the “pure and austere morals of the Christians” [122]?)
  - Were any groups within pagan society similar to the Christians in these respects? How did the prevalence or scarcity of such a trait in Roman society promote the spread of Christianity? (For example, how widely was the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: Abridged Edition*. Edited and abridged by David Womersley. New York: Penguin Books, 2005. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- doctrine of the immortality of the soul found among the pagans, and how did this affect the reception of the Christian claim?)
- If not at the time of the Empire, did Roman society ever possess this characteristic, or something similar? If so, does Gibbon think that it was a cause of Roman success?
  - Was such a characteristic inherently opposed to Roman mores? If so, does this mean that the rise of the Christian church was bound to come into conflict with the old Roman order?

To what extent does Gibbon acknowledge a divine or supernatural causality in the spread of Christianity? Does Gibbon leave room in his account for the “first” cause, concerning which one might say “[the victory of the Christian faith] was owing to the convincing evidence of the doctrine itself, and to the ruling providence of its great Author” (122)? In answering, consider his claim about the “more melancholy duty . . . imposed on the historian . . .” (121).

Gibbon describes a curiosity “to inquire by what means the Christian faith obtained so remarkable a victory over the established religions of the earth” (122). Yet he also claims that, “[I]nstead of viewing with astonishment the rapid progress of Christianity, [they] will perhaps be surprised that its success was not still more rapid and still more universal” (175). Does Gibbon think that Christianity’s triumph was surprising or predictable, rapid or drawn out?

Thus far, how does Gibbon view religion in general, that is, as a societal institution? Is religion itself a perfection or virtue of society, or only a tool? What benefits accrued to Rome as a result of the pagan religion? Did it promote order? What role did the Roman policy of religious toleration and incorporation play in this state of religion?

Which era of Roman history was the greatest, in Gibbon’s mind: the Republic, or the Empire during the reign of the Antonines? Consider the aspects of military order, patriotism, honor, religion, etc. (9–11, 16–20, 35 ff.).

What does Gibbon think of human nature? Recall: “From Grecian philosophy, [Romans such as Helvidius, Thrasea, Tacitus, and Pliny] had imbibed the justest and most liberal notions of the dignity of human nature, and the origin of civil society” (86). What were these notions? If one assumes them, what then is the best possible state for man?

What role does Gibbon ascribe to Augustus in the rise or fall of the greatness of Rome? (See 9–10, 65–7, 72–3, 77–8.)

Who were the greatest men to exist in the Roman Empire after the beginning of Christianity (186)? Why does Gibbon see them as great, and why does he bring them up in this history? What does their scorn for Christianity reveal?

Consider the nature of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* and his purpose in writing it.



- What purpose does Gibbon have for writing the work—is it to record, to summarize, to interpret, or something else? What benefit does he hope to offer his readers?
- Is the work objective and impartial? Does Gibbon give a “candid but rational inquiry into the progress and establishment of Christianity” (121; see also 159, 183)? What does Gibbon mean by stating that “The duty of an historian does not call upon him to interpose his private judgment in this nice and important controversy [of what miracles can be deemed credible]; but he ought not to dissemble the difficulty of adopting such a theory as may reconcile the interest of religion with that of reason . . .” (148–9)? What does this mean, practically speaking, in terms of writing history?
- Does Gibbon have a thesis in the first part of this work (Chapters 1–15)? If so, what is it? Is the work organized in order to defend the thesis?



## Study Guide on Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* Chapters 23–28, General Observations

Consider Julian's relationship with the Christian Church. Why does Gibbon claim that the "real and apparent magnitude of his faults" has been "exaggerated" by the character of Apostate (230<sup>1</sup>)? Is Gibbon right, or is Julian's reputation well earned?

- Consider Julian's public interaction with Christianity, as emperor. What were his principal policies? What was the motivation behind these policies?
  - Does Gibbon think Julian is virtuous for battling against the Christians and promoting paganism?
  - Was he governing wisely—if so, in what respect?
- Consider Julian's personal experience with Christianity. How does Gibbon assess Julian's rejection of his childhood religion? (See 232, 236–41.) Was this apostasy noble, or virtuous?
- Did Julian persecute the Christians? What was the "real and pernicious effect on the government of the empire" which Julian caused (230)? In what ways, or when, did he "violate the laws of prudence, and even of justice" (231)?
- Was Julian's "artful system" implemented successfully "without incurring the guilt, or reproach, of persecution" (273)? In what respect was it "artful"?
- What was the "deadly spirit of fanaticism" which "perverted the heart and understanding of a virtuous prince" (273)? Why does Gibbon still call him virtuous? (See also 242.)

How does Gibbon portray Julian? In what sense was Julian an "extraordinary man" (313)?

- How does Gibbon paint Julian's character? What are his virtues and vices? Consider his habits with respect to religion, fame, war, and the life of the mind (230, 273, 298, 313).
- What was the result of Julian's ambition? Consider:
  - "In the cooler moments of reflection, Julian preferred the useful and benevolent virtues of Antoninus: but his ambitious spirit was inflamed by the glory of Alexander; and he solicited, with equal ardour, the esteem of the wise, and the applause of the multitude" (277). Which spirit ruled Julian, ultimately?
  - Why did Julian attack Persia? (Consider 278.) What does this reveal about his spirit? How was he a "prince of a very different character [from that of Constantius]" (278)?
- What was Julian's greatest flaw, in Gibbon's mind?

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- Does Gibbon admire or condemn Julian’s religious piety?
- What kind of legacy did Julian leave, and what reputation does he deserve, in Gibbon’s mind?

What was Julian’s principal goal in re-establishing and reforming paganism? What were his major reforms (244–50)? What did he aim to accomplish by them? Why was paganism at that time not able to be reformed (245–7)?

Consider Gibbon’s portrayal of Julian with his portrayal of Jovian (313–26). How do the two compare—which was more noble, and which the better emperor?

- Did their different religions produce their different lives and characters, or vice versa?
- Why did Julian fail in his prosecution of the war (302–05)? In what manner did Jovian terminate the war, in Gibbon’s opinion (313–23)? How do their religious policies compare?

In Gibbon’s mind, were the actions of the Christian emperors against paganism justified? Were they prudent, noble? (Consider 334, 341, 349–50, 352.) How do their actions compare with Julian’s actions against the Catholic Church—were Julian’s actions prudent and justified?

To what extent did Christianity incorporate aspects of paganism into itself (359–60)? How does Gibbon evaluate this modification—was it a perfection or a corruption? From what assumptions does he make this judgment?

How would you summarize Gibbon’s analysis of the decline of Rome? What role did Christianity play in this decline? Consider the following:

- “The decline of Rome was the natural and inevitable effect of immoderate greatness” (435). What were Rome’s natural causes of corruption?
- “. . . [T]he introduction, or at least the abuse, of Christianity, had some influence on the decline and fall of the Roman empire” (436 ff.). What was this influence?
  - Did Christianity inherently oppose the old Roman virtues?
  - What does Gibbon mean by the “abuse of Christianity”? To what extent did the opposition between Christianity and pagan Rome come from the nature and essence of Christianity, and to what extent from its abuse?

What is Gibbon trying to accomplish in this work? Does he have a thesis? What is the purpose of the “General Observations” (434 ff.)? What does this reveal about Gibbon’s purpose for the work as a whole?

What is Gibbon’s view of mankind and its state (441–43)? Is progress destined to go ever on? Is Gibbon optimistic about the state of mankind? What exactly does he think improves—the economic, political, or moral welfare, or something else?



How does Gibbon view religion, generally? Is the religious man (such as Julian, or Jovian) with respect to his religion wise or foolish, virtuous or vicious, noble or contemptible?

Does Gibbon prefer the “sublime and important principles of natural religion” (236) to those of Christianity proper? How do these compare with the “deformed features of paganism” (235)? How well does each religion conduce to individual and social virtues? How does Gibbon compare Christian and pagan doctrine, and what purpose does he have for this comparison? (For example, see 236–7.)

Is Gibbon himself a “judicious and candid historian, the impartial spectator of [Julian’s] life and death” (230)? Or does Gibbon give a biased portrayal? Does he paint a narrative of Julian which glorifies him, and unduly so?

**Suggested use:** This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

