This year is the 2000th anniversary of the accession of Tiberius as ruler of the Roman Empire. He is remembered today mostly because it was during his reign that Jesus Christ was crucified. As a result he has been vilified by historians in the past. Modern historians, however, are reassessing this Roman emperor and questioning whether he really was as bad as he has been portrayed.

He is mentioned in Luke’s gospel in order to indicate the time when John the Baptist began his mission, which preceded that of Jesus: *In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, . . .* (Luke 3:1)

Tiberius was born at Rome in 42 BC. His father was Tiberius Claudius Nero, a member of a distinguished Roman family, and his mother was Livia Drusilla (Figure 1). She must have been beautiful because Octavian (later known as the emperor Augustus) wanted to marry her. Livia’s husband divorced her so that the marriage could take place. So Tiberius became the stepson of Octavian in 38 BC when he was four years old. Octavian had only one child, Julia, from a previous marriage. She was three years younger than Tiberius.

Tiberius was trained in the military arts and became a successful army officer. In 20 BC he fought against the Parthians who agreed to return the legionary standards that were lost by the Roman general, Crassus, at Carrhae 33 years earlier. (Figure 2) In 16 BC Tiberius was appointed governor of Gaul, and in the same year he married Vipsania, the daughter of Agrippa, who was a friend of Augustus and a successful general. (Figure 3) Tiberius and Vipsania were very much in love, and had a son, Drusus (Figure 4), born in 13 BC. Also in 13 BC he received his first consulship, a fitting reward for his service to the Roman people.

Unfortunately for Tiberius, life went pear-shaped from then on. Julia had married Agrippa, who was Tiberius’ father-in-law, and they had three sons: Gaius, Lucius and Agrippa Postumus, but in 12 BC Agrippa died. Augustus insisted that Tiberius divorce Vipsania and marry Julia because he saw him as a suitable stepfather and protector for his heirs. The problem was that Tiberius could not stand Julia who was apparently licentious in her behaviour. After their child died in infancy he broke off marital relations with her and would have nothing to do with her. He spent most of his time away earlier. (Figure 2) In 16 BC Tiberius was appointed governor of Gaul, and in the same year he married Vipsania, the daughter of Agrippa, who was a friend of Augustus and a successful general. (Figure 3) Tiberius and Vipsania were very much in love, and had a son, Drusus (Figure 4), born in 13 BC. Also in 13 BC he received his first consulship, a fitting reward for his service to the Roman people.

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from Rome campaigning with the army, but on one occasion when he was in Rome he happened to see Vipsania, who had been remarried on Augustus’ orders to a senator, and he was so overcome with sadness that he followed her through the streets, weeping. When Augustus heard of it, he forbade Tiberius to ever see her again.

On his return in 2 AD he lived privately with no official duties. But in the same year Lucius died inexplicably on a trip to Spain, and in 4 AD Gaius, the older grandson of Augustus, died from wounds received during a military operation in the east. Although Agrippa Postumus was still alive he was only 13. Augustus therefore adopted Tiberius as his son and co-heir with his remaining grandson. In 7 AD Augustus disinherited and exiled Agrippa Postumus because of his bad behaviour.

Tiberius now continued his military career, campaigning along the Rhine and in the Balkans. He returned to Rome in 12 AD to celebrate a triumph, a celebratory procession through the streets. (Figure 6) In 14 AD Augustus died of natural causes at the age of 76, and Tiberius was his obvious successor.

Although in exile, Agrippa Postumus still represented a dangerous rival, but he was murdered immediately after Augustus’ death. Tacitus, a historian writing in about 100 AD, blamed Tiberius, but Suetonius in his book, *The Twelve Caesars*, written in about 120 AD, suggested that it might have been ordered by Livia, or even by Augustus himself before he died.

With a show of reluctance Tiberius accepted the title of emperor, and conscientiously devoted himself to ruling the
em pire. He was an able administrator and the people prospered during his long peaceful reign. He was genuinely modest, and hated flattery. He vetoed proposals for the dedication of temples to his divinity. He even vetoed a proposal that the month of September be renamed ‘Tiberius’. The previous months had been renamed ‘July’ after Julius Caesar, and ‘August’ after Augustus. He was careful with money and gave no public shows, much to the disappointment of the Roman people. He never gave the soldiers anything more than their wages, and gained a reputation for miserliness. Being reserved and stern in character, he was not popular, but abuse or lampoonery did not seem to worry him. According to Suetonius, he “would often say that liberty to speak and think as one pleases is the test of a free country”.

His nephew, Germanicus (Figure 7), was
very popular. A handsome man with an outgoing personality and a lovely family he was adored by the troops under his command. They called his small son, ‘Caligula’, which means ‘little boots’, because his father dressed him as a soldier. They wanted Germanicus to succeed Augustus but he refused. Tiberius sent him to take command of the eastern provinces but he died in Antioch accusing the Roman governor of Syria, Piso, of poisoning him. Everyone suspected that Piso had acted under orders from Tiberius, but it is quite possible that Germanicus died of natural causes.

Germanicus died in 19 AD and Drusus in 23 AD. The loss of his only son affected Tiberius greatly, and in 26 AD when he was 67 he retired to the beautiful island of Capri (Figures 8 and 9), although he still held the reigns of empire. According to Suetonius, it was said that the main reason for his leaving Rome was to get away from his mother who annoyed him. As the dowager empress she was a powerful figure in Roman society. When she died in 29 AD he did not even attend her funeral. In fact, he never returned to Rome, where Sejanus, the commander of the Praetorian Guard, gradually assumed more power.

In 31 AD Tiberius’ sister-in-law warned him that Sejanus was planning to seize total power. Tiberius had Sejanus executed, and before his wife committed suicide she revealed that Livilla, the wife of Drusus, had conspired with Sejanus to murder Drusus. Tiberius was shocked, and he ordered that the supporters of Sejanus be hunted down and killed. He also ordered that his name be removed from public monuments and coins (Figure 10). It seems that at this time Tiberius became mentally disordered. According to Suetonius, “Tiberius grew enraged and redoubled his cruelties until nobody was safe from torture and death.” A reign of terror ensued. A person could be executed just for carrying a coin bearing the image of Tiberius or Augustus into a brothel or lavatory: “With my coin in your bosom you turned into foul and noisome places and relieved your bowels.”

It was rumoured that at Capri all sorts of sexual perversions occurred. According to Suetonius, “Some aspects of his criminal obscenity are almost too vile to discuss, much less believe.” He had become “a filthy old man”. But according to Chris Scarre, the author of The Chronicle of the Roman Emperors (Thames and Hudson, 1995), “Most of this is later invention – Tiberius was in any event in his 70s by this time – but it indicates the growing odium and disrespect in which the old man was held.” When he eventually died in 36 AD at the age of 78 there was much rejoicing in Rome.

The coins issued by Tiberius did not vary much during his long reign. The gold and silver coins show only a few types. The aes (copper alloy) coins minted at Rome show more types, but they rarely reflect contemporary events. (Figure 11) The coins minted at cities in the provinces are much more numerous and show some types of local interest. (Figure 12) The most famous coin of Tiberius was the one that Jesus saw when he said, “Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.” This incident is described in Mark’s gospel (Mk 12:13-17, and parallels). A group of Jews had asked him, “Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” After looking at the coin he enquired of the group whose image was on it. When they replied that it was Caesar’s, he said, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” The coin is usually considered to be the commonest denarius of Tiberius (Figure 13), millions of which were minted at Lugdunum in Gaul. In 2013, however, Richard Abdy who is the curator of Roman coins at the British Museum, and

Figure 10 – As of Tiberius struck at Bilbilis in Spain in 31 AD to celebrate Sejanus becoming a consul with Tiberius. The head of Tiberius appears on the obverse. On the reverse the name of Sejanus has been removed (damnatio memoriae). (Triton X, Lot 563. Courtesy Classical Numismatic Group)

Figure 11 – Sestertius of Tiberius struck at Rome in 22-23 AD to publicize his generosity to the cities of Asia that were affected by an earthquake in 17 AD. The obverse legend means, ‘The cities of Asia re-established’. Tiberius sits on a curule chair and holds a patera. (Dr Busso Peus Nachfolger Auction 401, Lot 463)

Figure 12 – Bronze coin of Tiberius struck at Caesarea Philippi in 15-16 AD. Diameter 18 mm. Obverse: head of Tiberius with a star countermark. Reverse: The Augusteum (Temple to Rome and Augustus built by Herod the Great at Caesarea Philippi). The city was the capital of Philip the tetrarch, and Jesus visited the region (Matthew 16:13). (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane)
A melia Dowler who is curator of Greek coins, wrote a book, *Coins and the Bible*, in which they stated, “Although it is not impossible that Jesus could have handled such a coin, it is unlikely, for the Levant had its own local supplies of silver coinage and early first century denarii from the Roman west are very rare as finds in the area.” They suggested that the coin was a Syrian tetradrachm.

What conclusion should be made about Tiberius himself? Was he just a dirty old man, as Suetonius stated? According to Michael Grant, who wrote the foreword to the modern translation of *The Twelve Caesars*, Suetonius loved an entertaining story, and eccentricities rather than virtues remained in the reader’s mind. Suetonius liked to emphasize the sensational in his writing.

Tacitus, in his *Annals of Imperial Rome* is scathing in his account of Tiberius, but he lived during Domitian’s reign of terror, and “he displayed an anti-imperial, pro-senatorial bias, as he was a member of the Senate that felt the full impact of imperial oppression under Domitian.” (*The Penguin Dictionary of Ancient History*, page 615) Although modern standards of morality are, no doubt, very different from those of ancient Rome, it is difficult to believe that Tiberius would have engaged in the disgusting sexual activities described by Suetonius. He was 67 when he retired to Capri and he probably became mentally depressed, but usually people with depression are less interested in sexual matters. The old man, hated by his people and condemned by historians, may have been just a sad, disillusioned human being. He was probably someone who would have responded positively to Jesus’ message of universal love.

Figure 14 – A gold aureus of Tiberius. (Collection of St John’s Cathedral, Brisbane)

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