

Rome

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

Rome is over. Not just the republic, but the TV show. Despite solid ratings and Golden Globe nominations, the popular cable series ended last year. HBO, the BBC and the Italian RAI had teamed up to offer two seasons of ten episodes each about ancient Rome. Now the series is available on DVD.

Gone are the tacky swords-and-sandals portrayals of the ancient world. The producers of *Rome* favor not only realistic battle scenes but British accents, graphic sex and characters to care about. They also brilliantly illustrate the world into which the Christian church emerged.

The series begins with the battlefield triumphs of Julius Caesar over “barbarians” in northern Europe and ends with his adopted nephew Octavian’s ascension to emperor with his victory over Mark Antony. But it concentrates very little on these highlights of history and instead burrows into the lives of several interrelated characters—especially Lucius Vorenus (Kevin McKidd) and Titus Pullo (Ray Stephenson), rivals-turned-friends within the legions who serve at the sides of sometimes allied, sometimes competing consuls. The two challenge and console one another through hard times as they lead a band of soldiers in charge of the Aventine Hill and its control of Rome’s trade.

Other prominent characters include a family conniving enough to make American politicians seem chaste: Julius Caesar (Ciarán Hinds) has a lover, Atia of the Julii (Polly Walker), who becomes the lover of Mark Antony (James Purefoy), who marries Atia’s daughter Octavia (Kerry Condon) and abandons them both for the irresistibly seductive Cleopatra (Lyndsey Marshal). This isn’t the Rome of your boring Latin class and it’s not exactly accurate history. But it is a Rome that is passionately, dangerously alive.

And this Rome is not irreligious. What Christians would come to call pagan practice is replete throughout the series. *Rome* shows Roman religion to be much like ours: often practiced with fidelity, often practiced for an ulterior motive, and always passionately argued over. The Roman religion portrayed here is not at all that

decayed, rotting hulk that a generation of historians portrayed, a religion that toppled in the face of Christianity. When Vorenus in anger casts a curse on his children, Pullo tries to comfort him: “Well, at least you didn’t sacrifice a chicken.” Vorenus glowers at him and says: “You did.” Pullo sighs—they’re in real trouble now.

When Atia’s rival, Servilia of the Junii (Lindsay Duncan), casts a curse on her, she does so by chanting outside her home, day and night, “Atia of the Julii, I call for justice,” while her servant pours ashes on her head. Atia finally emerges. “What do you want, you crazy bitch?” (modern slang renders this show more immediate and, oddly, more Roman—they surely cursed with at least this much gusto). Servilia asks all the gods of the underworld to make this woman taste nothing but iron and ashes. She then seals the curse with a dagger to her heart.

Judaism is portrayed as openly disdained by Romans for its belief in one God and its oddly particular people. One prominent Jewish character is Timon (Lee Bourdman), Atia’s chief servant until he revolts. Later Timon gets mixed up in a plot to murder Herod just after the Jewish puppet-ruler pays a bribe to Mark Antony to become “King Herod.” Timon is now a genuine zealot, almost willing to kill a fellow Jew who’s too cozy with Rome or to start a brawl in a synagogue to prove a point. Religion was bare-knuckled business.

The Romans were ruthlessly violent, and *Rome* shows it. Pullo casually asks Cicero (David Bamber) if he can have some of his ripening peaches—and then thrusts a sword into his neck. Young Octavian (Max Pirkis) has Titus Pullo help him kidnap the man he suspects is the true father of the child once thought to be Vorenus’s. The man won’t confess. “Torture him,” the future emperor orders. Pullo pauses: “They have experts in these things, you know” (the reflections on torture obviously echo current political debates).

Watching *Rome*, I could imagine how elated early Christians were when the emperor Constantine and his court converted to Christianity. No wonder that Eusebius spoke of Constantine, Octavian’s successor, in messianic terms. To go from a regime with rampant sexual cavorting and violence to one with less open sexual cavorting (if not less violence), and one in which the praise of Jesus was public and the church was officially supported, was something of a miracle. *Rome* makes that clear. And it’s marvelously entertaining.